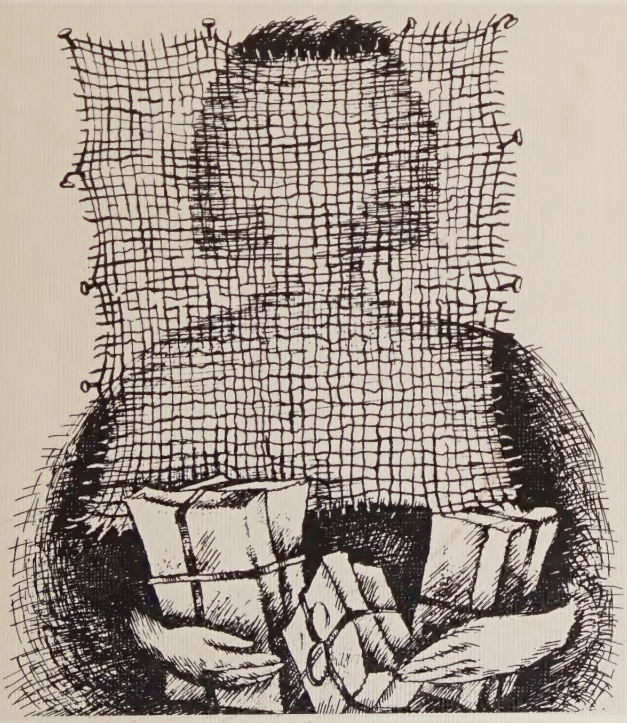
RUSSIAN AND SOVIET Story

Yu. Nagibin

AN UNWRITTEN STORY BY SOMERSET MAUGHAM



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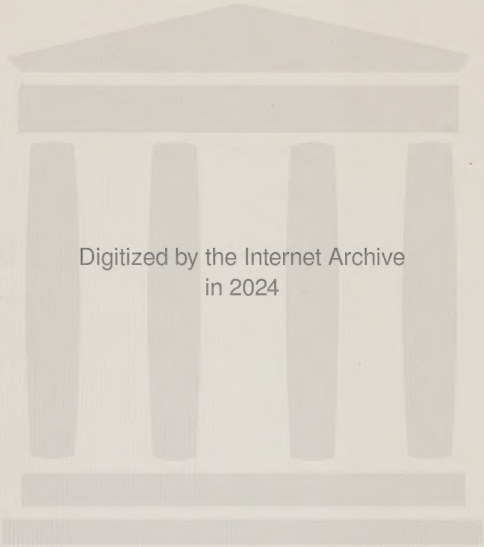
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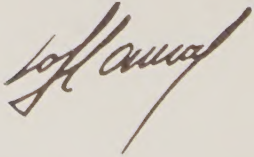

Yu. Nagibin

AN UNWRITTEN STORY BY SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Novellas

Raduga Publishers Moscow

Translated from the Russian
Designed by *Pavel Nikiporets*

Ю. НАГИБИН

НЕНАПИСАННЫЙ РАССКАЗ СОМЕРСЕТА МОЭМА
Новеллы

На английском языке

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

Although collections of my short stories have appeared in English-speaking countries at various times, it would be presumptuous of me to assume that my name is well-known to a wide foreign reading public. So let me first introduce myself.

I was born into an office worker's family in Moscow in 1920. We lived in a fine old part of Moscow near Chistoprudni Boulevard, which I have devoted not a few short stories to, and our house was surrounded by old churches, mansions, and gardens planted in the seventeenth century. Close-by was the golden spire of the famous Menshikov tower, which was then the highest in Moscow. My peers and I learnt about Russian history not from books but from Moscow buildings, churches, gardens and boulevards. My impressions of those far-off days resulted in my *Book of Childhood* which has been translated

into many foreign languages. The book of historical short stories and novellas *A Tsarskoye Selo Morning* also came of my childhood fascination for the history of Moscow embodied in its architecture.

As a teenager I had no clearly-defined, obvious talents, and upon leaving school, unlike most of my comrades, I did not know what to do next. Both my mother and my stepfather, the writer Y. Rikachev, hoped that I would gain eminence as an engineer or in the exact sciences, and they earnestly plied me with chemistry and physics books, and popular biographies of great scientists. To keep them happy I bought some test tubes, phials and various kinds of chemicals but all my scientific work resulted in was my making awful-quality shoe polish once in a while. And then one day there was an explosion and I nearly burned down the apartment, and my daring experiments were banned.

To make up for it, I felt more and more at home on the football field, and my coach predicted a great future for me. He promised to make me a substitute for the top players by the time I was eighteen. My mother, however, was unwilling to accept the idea of having gone through all the agonies of childbirth just to produce a left half-back or right wing. It was evidently under pressure from her that my stepfather kept urging me with increasing frequency to write something. And so it was under external pressure that

my literary career began. I wrote a short story about a skiing day-trip which my whole class had gone on one weekend. My stepfather read it and stopped asking me to write. Of course, it was bad but I still have every right to consider that my introduction to the world of writing was determined by this very first attempt: not to invent but to go straight from life, and "delve" into the material of reality, striving to find as much as possible in it.

I understood my stepfather perfectly well and made no attempt to protest his scathing criticism clothed in silence. However, writing had got a grip on me. It was with profound surprise that I discovered how from the sheer need to convey to paper various simple impressions of the day all my feelings and observations connected with this perfectly ordinary trip increased both in depth and width. I saw my school friends and the unexpectedly complex, subtle and tangled pattern of their relationships in a new light.

One day my stepfather picked up from the table yet another of the literary works I had forgotten and said: "Obviously, this is really what you should be doing. Write." Encouraged, I started writing away and my standard of play on the football field deteriorated instantly. Soon my coach dropped me from the team, which by then I did not mind at all as I was totally obsessed with writing.

A new stage in my literary studies began. So exacting was my stepfather, whom I con-

sider my first and only teacher, that he used to drive me to despair. At times I started hating words but it was already hard to stop me writing.

Even so, after leaving school I ended up going to the 1st Moscow Medical Institute instead of the Faculty of Literature. All the deplorable obstacles in a writer's career frightened my mother and stepfather. I resisted for a long time but I could not withstand the example of Chekhov and Bulgakov. After all, look how talented they were, and yet they both insured themselves by having a good solid profession!

I studied hard although in my heart of hearts I knew I was not cut out to be a good doctor. The Medical Institute course was extremely difficult and there could be no question of me writing now. I lasted until the first exams...

They coincided with the time of year when students were enrolling in the script-writing faculty of the Cinema Institute.

Before the war studies at the Cinema Institute were easy, and I had as much time as I liked to write short stories, articles, and reviews. In March 1940 my first short story "The Double Mistake" about the fate of a budding writer appeared in the journal *Ogonyok*. I ran from one newspaper kiosk to the next asking if they had Nagibin's latest short story. The glowing memory of one's first publication lasts longer than

that of one's first love.

When World War II broke out I volunteered for the front and was conferred the rank of lieutenant. I served on the Volkhov, Leningrad and Voronezh fronts. In 1943 my first book of war stories *A Man from the Front*, closely reflecting my own personal experiences, came out. Even before its appearance I was accepted into the Writers' Union on the basis of my journal publications.

At the end of 1942 I suffered serious contusion which left me sick for a considerable length of time but as soon as I recovered I went back to the front as a war correspondent to the very peaceable trade-union newspaper *Trud*. I had occasion to be in Stalingrad during the heaviest battles, in the blockade of Leningrad, and later witnessed the liberation of Byelorussia and visited other sections of the front. I also travelled into the rear lines and saw the beginnings of the restoration work in Stalingrad and the first tractor being built and the flooded mines of the Donbas being drained and the Volga dockers and Ivanovo weavers getting back to work...

My impressions of these visits appeared not just in newspaper articles but also in several collections of short stories.

After the war I started life as a professional writer. I did not go back to my studies as I was already married by this time. For a writer practical experience is more important than lectures and seminars. The war had given me

quite a lot of experience but all of a rather similar kind: now it was over, I had to see how people were getting on with their lives and healing their deep wounds. So, I travelled about for many years as a correspondent.

A turning point in my career as a writer came with my story *The Pipe* which, along with *The Winter Oak*, became probably the most popular of all my works. (Both stories have been translated into English.) It was given an extremely warm and enthusiastic reception by the public. Strictly speaking, it was only with the appearance of *The Pipe* that I experienced the strange and tremendously exciting feeling that I had a reader. For some reason or other the wanderings and misadventures of a little gypsy boy during the first few years after the Revolution turned out to be just as interesting for the people of my country as it was for Africans and Indians, Tamils, Singhalese, Arabs, Chinese and all Europeans without exception. And *The Winter Oak* was also nearly as widely circulated.

From then on I started leading a more sedentary life, the kind so necessary for a professional writer. As before my "main" genre remained the short story.

One could even put it like this: it was not I who chose the genre of the short story but the short story which chose me. Such is the way I am made that I cannot write "at length". I run out of breath quickly. In a football

match I only used to last until half-time: I'd put everything I had into it. The structure of "small" works evidently suits my inner rhythm. What's more, I am quite sure any subject may be covered in a couple of hundred pages. In our exceedingly busy and hurried age one is bound out of mere politeness to the reader to be brief and to the point. Laconism is a demand of the accelerated time and pace of city life.

However, enough of talking shop... In the mid-fifties, without breaking my ties with Moscow, I decided to set up home permanently on the banks of the River Desna, some forty kilometres from Moscow, and built a small cosy house among the pines, firs and birches. In the tranquillity of the woods and fields my writing productivity sharply increased; collections of short stories came out, one after the other: *The Winter Oak, The Rocky Threshold, Near and Far, On the Lakes, Someone Else's Heart, Lanes of My Childhood.*

This last cycle grew into the large *Book of Childhood.* All my short stories about a Moscow childhood in the 1920s are autobiographical, as are the stories about my adolescence and youth. And most of the characters in them have kept their own names. I loved my childhood very much, and the large noisy court-yard where we used to play football and hockey, race pigeons, fight, fall in love, argue, make up, learn how to stick up for

ourselves, and I was just as fond of my school in a quiet side-street near the Chistiye Ponds. My class who left school in 1938 are still friends, and every year we meet on Victory Day, May 9th, by the statue of the poet Alexander Griboyedov at Chistiye Ponds. And we remember our friends who are no longer with us: those who did not come back from the war, and the others who died of their wounds later or from an illness, and we also remember our teachers, sing old songs and have a really enjoyable time. I cherish this friendship most dearly.

I don't have to look for material for my short stories as life itself presents me with subjects. After my stories about the last war, about village life and childhood came a series of hunting stories. One of my closest friends once took me on a duck shoot. It was then that I came to know and started to write about Meshchera, and one of its inhabitants—a forest warden by the name of Anatoly Ivanovich. Besides having written a book of short stories about him and the script of the film *The Chase*, I simply love this extraordinary, proud man very much and greatly value his friendship. And the Meshchera region is a beautiful place about two hundred kilometres from Moscow renowned for its thick forests, deep lakes, and clean rivers as well as for being the birthplace of the great Russian poet, Sergei Yesenin.

People who have read my books know that

I am very fond of animals. You may be wondering how you can go hunting and love your "lesser brothers" (Yesenin) at the same time. However, bar the pot-bellied dilettantes whom obliging professional hunters help shoot game with buck shot, all hunters love animals. A shot at a swiftly flying duck, or a wood-hen sweeping powerfully out of a thicket or for that matter at any other wild animal or bird with speed and skill to protect it, is not cruel...

Not so long ago this is just about as far as my reasonings on hunting and angling went (and I was just as keen an angler as I was a hunter). I professed Hemingway's simple creed that since there is game, there has to be a hunter. All you have to do is to try and shoot to kill so as not to cause unnecessary suffering to a living creature, and nothing else matters. However, the most horrific attack upon nature today has changed some of my principles. Whereas I once adhered to a philosophy which wittingly condoned hunters, I now hold the totally contradictory opinion that, given the impoverished state of the kingdom of nature today, hunting and angling are amoral unless carried out by authorized hunters and fishermen who abide by the established laws. It is up to us people to do everything in our power to rescue from annihilation the defenceless world of nature which we have been entrusted with, and stamp out man's age-

old craving to dominate by destructive means.

Between these two opposite poles in my attitude to hunting lay a great distance during which I discovered man's place in nature for myself. To start with, I attached no importance whatsoever to the way man conducted himself in this world he had been placed in charge of, that is, among the animals and vegetation. However, the more acutely I became aware of how fragile and defenceless this world was against its biped overlords, the deeper and more complex my attitude grew towards the way things had developed here. Unfortunately, when it comes to being responsible and magnanimous, not many people stand the test. You can do what you like in nature, and there's no more severe test for a person than impunity. I gradually came to the conclusion that someone who behaves badly in a forest, on a river, on a lake, or in the mountains, is likely to behave likewise in his family, with his close friends, at work, and in everyday life. A direct and insoluble link is to be found here. And you will not get a more accurate and testing criterion for a personality than his behaviour pattern in nature. So this is how my old hunting theme developed.

It may seem that my whole life has been based on a series of denials: first, I said goodbye to the world and buried myself like a hermit in a house in the woods, and then I finished with hunting and fishing (and also

sport which had given me quite a few subjects but which I had to reject on account of an early heart attack) but in fact this is not the case at all. Every year I go on a short car trip around some beautiful old Russian towns, and, well, what the distances are like in Russia is well-known—in a "short" journey one sometimes covers as many as two and a half thousand kilometres. Every year I go abroad. And these trips have produced the following books: *My Africa, My Friends, People*, and *Don't Let Him Die*, to name but a few. Foreign topics, the notion of people as one family, passengers on one —and only one, no other is possible- doleful ship, is perhaps the most constant in my writings. And in my film scripts too. I have taken part in many coproductions—with Italians, Americans, Japanese, Norwegians, Poles, Hungarians and our films have served the aims of mutual understanding and peace.

I have a great many friends, and our reunions are always noisy and filled with fierce but friendly arguments, and always a source of much joy. Even hunting has not disappeared from my life completely, true, now I go in for an innocuous type of hunting: mushroom-hunting. And the place I live in has the most mushrooms in all the Moscow region. And I still go in for sports, too: billiards, table tennis and armchair games like football on the TV...

I have still to mention my short stories on

eternal themes such as life and death, love and hatred, friendship, quests for the truth and the right way in life. They can hardly be separated out for they exist, like breath, in any of my stories.

For the past fifteen years, while not abandoning present-day life, I have derived more and more pleasure from writing about the past. This large cycle includes stories and small novellas about Tchaikovsky, Bach, Rachmaninov, Pushkin, Tyutchev, Goethe, Verdi, Fet, Hemingway, and other lesser-known but equally worthy people from the arts world. My interest in the past has gradually expanded. What interested me was not solely the psychology behind creativity but also the interaction between a creative person and society. One tends to think, and quite rightly so, that the artist is indebted to society, but the reverse is also true: society is no less indebted to the artist. Just think how much the greatest creative figures have suffered—from Leonardo to, say, Rachmaninov—from being misunderstood by their contemporaries. The clear message in my stories is: people, be more attentive, more constant, kinder and more open with those who give their last drop of blood for your sake. I want to pay tribute, albeit too late in life or posthumously, to unacknowledged, unrecognised or underestimated creative people. Another purpose of my writings is to understand exactly how a poem or musical image came into being, and touch

upon the secrets of the birth of beauty.

I have put much effort into my work in the cinema. I began by writing film scripts for my own stories—*The Night Guest, The Slowest Train,* and *The Little Girl and the Echo* (which won the Grand Prix at the Cannes International Film Festival), and then I turned to writing original scripts which were used for the films *Tchaikovsky, The Red Tent, The Realm of Women, The Director, Jaroslaw Dabrowski* and my most famous film *The Chairman* about one of the people who during the grim post-war years raised the villages that had been burned to ashes by the enemy.

The Chairman is not, however, as famous abroad as is the highly popular film, *Dersu Uzala*, which was directed from my script by the illustrious Japanese director Akira Kurosawa at the Moscow Film Studios. This film won the highest award in the cinema world—an Oscar.

And, finally, let me say a few words about this edition.

I have had links with English-speaking countries for a long time. First of all, and most importantly, I have many friends there: in England, the United States, Australia, and in various British Commonwealth countries where English is the second language, such as India, Kenya, Nigeria and Sri Lanka. Most of these friendships began during my visits over there: as a member of Soviet writers' delega-

tions I have travelled round most of the African continent and written the book of essays *My Africa*; I went on a wonderful tour of lectures to twenty-five states of the USA, which lasted two and a half months, and I have also written a book which was published in Moscow and New York; I spent about a month in Australia in the company of one of my favourite writers and dear friends Alan Marshall (alas, no longer with us), wonderful John Morrison and delightful, witty Jude Wotten; I visited India with a group of film-makers and showed *Dersu Uzala* there; I have been to England as a tourist and to lecture. Whereas in the case of Marshall and Morrison we met up again after making friends in Moscow, I have acquired many other friends during trips abroad. They include a large number of American professors of Slavonic studies. When they are in Moscow with groups of students, they always come out and see me in my woodland home. I was once visited by an elderly English housewife who had got to know me through my stories which had been published in England and had written me a letter; another visitor was Bandu, a writer from Sri Lanka, who had translated my story *The Pipe* into Singhalese; and then there was Grace Ogot, a fine writer from Kenya. In Nigeria I became good friends with John Peper Clark, the story-teller Tutuola and the famous poet and playwright Vole Shoinka. I couldn't possibly list all my

friends, especially as in many instances their names would mean nothing to anyone else but sound magic to me: like that, say, of a witchdoctor from Cano (Nigeria), two old women from the village of Aberder (Kenya), a Sydney fisherman, a hereditary worker and his strapping sons from Brisbane, a Bombay taxi-driver and a happy-go-lucky Calcutta beggar whom I met at a market.

There is hardly any need to say how pleased I am that my book is being published in English, especially as the edition will be distributed not only in England and the United States where I have been published previously but also in countries where in the best instance my name is known from films. *Dersu Uzala* has been screened everywhere and *Tchaikovsky* about the great Russian composer was awarded the Grand Prix at the Ist International Film Festival in Delhi. It's only a pity that neither the witchdoctor from Cano nor the Calcutta beggar will ever read this edition because the former is illiterate and the latter cannot stand modern fiction.

I should mention that I have written both stories and essays about the countries this book will be going to. For example, I have a long story about Hemingway and a book of American essays, a short story about Somerset Maugham, and another about a passionately keen Indian cinema buff, an article and essay about Marshall, and essays about Kenya and Nigeria. I have translated a large talented

story by John Morrison and I am currently translating the superb English novelist J. R. Tolkien. So it goes without saying how delighted I am this collection of mine is to be published in English. How much delight it will bring readers remains to be seen.

ECHO

Sinyegoria; midday; the beach deserted; a little girl coming out of the sea... All this about thirty years ago.

I was searching for pebbles. The day before had been stormy and the breakers had swept up the beach almost to the white walls of the sanatorium. Now the sea was calm and in its retreat had left bare an expanse of chocolate-brown sand with a ridge of pebbles along its middle. Beyond the ridge the damp sand was so firm that your feet left no imprint on it. Scattered about on the smooth surface were greenish-blue rounded stones, others that looked like lumps of sugar, pieces of glass like well-sucked boiled sweets, dead crabs and strands of decaying seaweed that gave off a sharp, iodiny smell. I knew that big waves can wash ashore beautiful little stones and I was making a slow, patient search of the sandy part and the newly-formed ridge.

"Hey, you!" a piping voice reached me. "You're sitting on my knickers."

I looked up. Beside me stood a naked little girl with skinny arms and legs and her ribs showing. Her long, damp hair clung to her face and water glistened on her thin body that as yet showed little trace of sunburn. She was almost blue with cold and covered with goose-pimples.

She bent down, pulled from under me a pair of yellow and blue striped knickers, shook them, threw them on the stones and flopped down on a little patch of golden sand. Then she began scooping the sand towards her, banking it against her sides.

"Can't you put some clothes on?" I grunted.

"Why? You get sunburnt better this way."

"Aren't you ashamed?"

"Mummy says it doesn't matter with children. She won't let me bathe in my knickers. You catch cold that way and she has no time to look after people with colds."

Something glistened among the dark, rough stones. It was like a pure, tiny tear. From inside my shirt I pulled out a cardboard cigarette-box and added the tear to my collection.

"Come on—show me!"

She swept the wet strands of hair off her face and tucked them behind her ears, revealing a thin, freckled face, green cat's eyes, a snub nose and an ear-to-ear mouth. She began inspecting my collection. On a thin bed of cotton wool lay—a small, oval cornelian of

transparent pink; a larger one that the sea hadn't worked on long enough was still shapeless and dead to the light; several little pebbles with curious patterns traced on them; a petrified starfish; a stone bearing the imprint of a little crab; a ring-shaped pebble ("chicken charms" we called them) and, the pride of my collection, a smoky topaz—a wisp of mist caught in dark glass.

"Is that your bag for today?"

"Today? It took me all my time here to get that lot."

"H'm. Not much."

"No? Let's see *you* do better."

"Why should I?" She jerked a thin, peeling shoulder. "I cannot see myself crawling all over the place in the heat for the sake of some dirty little stones."

Yah! Cheeky little brat! I thought for a moment and added for good measure: "Naked, skinny little brat!"

"Brat yourself!.. And you collect stamps too, I bet."

"What if I do?"

"And cigarette-boxes?"

"I did when I was little."

"And what else?"

"I once had a collection of butterflies," I thought that would please her—and for some reason I wanted to please her.

"Ugh!.. Nasty!" Her upper lip curled, exposing two sharp white teeth that were longer than the others. "Squashed their heads

and pinned them on cardboard, I suppose?"

"Nothing of the sort! I put them to sleep with ether."

"Just as bad. Ugh! I can't bear killing things. Nasty, that's what it is!"

I thought hard for a time, then ventured: "D'you know what else I collected? Bicycles, the different makes, you know."

"No! Really?"

"Honour bright! I'd chase every cyclist and ask him, 'Please, uncle, what's the make of your bike?' and he'd answer Dux, or maybe Latvella—even Opel, but I couldn't get a Royal Enfield." I rattled on quickly to stop her butting in with some snappy remark. But she was serious-faced, interested, and even stopped pouring sand through her fingers. "Every day I'd run to Lubyanka Square. Once I nearly got run over by a tram. But at last I found a Royal Enfield. It's got a violet label with an 'R' on it—the Roman letter 'R', not ours, of course."

"Ah! Now you're talking." Her big mouth split open in approving laughter. "Listen! I'll tell you a secret. I'm a collector too."

"What d'you collect?"

"Echoes... Got quite a lot of them already. One has a ringing tinkle, another's like a bassoon. Then there's one with three voices and one like peas rattling on a drum. Then—"

"Fibber!"

The green cat's eyes spat fire at me. "Fibber yourself! I'll show you, if you like."

"All right. Show me."

"But only for you, mind. Nobody else... Maybe they won't let you; it means climbing up to the Big Saddle."

"They'll let me."

"Well, then. Tomorrow—first thing... Where d'you live?"

"On the sea-front. With the Bulgarians, you know."

"We're at Tarakanikha's."

"Oh! Then I've seen your mother. Tall, isn't she, with black hair?"

"Uhu. Only I hardly ever see mummy."

"Why?"

"Always out dancing." She shook back her hair. It was dry now and I could see it was a sort of dull, greyish tow. "Come on! Let's have a dip." She jumped up with sand clinging all over her and dashed down to the water with a flicker of thin pink heels.

The morning was sunny and windless, but not hot. The sea's cool breath after the storm was fighting hard against the heat from the sun. When a cloud, thin as cigarette smoke, cut off the sun's rays and wiped the blinding southern sparkle off the gravelled paths, the white-washed walls and the tiled roofs, everything would take on that frowning look you get before a spell of stormy weather, and the cool breath of the sea became stronger right away.

The path to the Big Saddle took us first in twists and turns that skirted little lumpy hills,

then made up its mind and cut straight up through a forest of hazel trees. At one point it was sliced across by a shallow, stony ditch, the bed of one of those rapid rivulets that make a lot of rumbling and splashing down the mountainside when there's heavy rain, but run themselves dry quicker than the rain on the tree leaves.

We had gone quite a long way when it struck me I didn't even know the girl's name.

"Hey, you!" I shouted after the yellow and blue striped knickers that flickered ahead of me like a butterfly among the trees. "Hey, you! What's your name?"

She stopped. I caught up with her. The forest here was thinner, and between the trees you could see the bay and the village, a tiny handful of little houses. The sea, large and solemn-looking, stretched to the horizon but didn't stop there: it went on up into the sky in misty, bluish layers that melted into one another. In the bay it pretended to be as timid and tiny as a kitten; one moment it would stretch a white ribbon along the beach, the next moment whip it away.

"Don't know how to put it," the girl began thoughtfully. "I've a stupid name, Victorina, but they call me Vitka, as if I was a boy named Victor."

"Why not Vika, then? That's all right for a girl."

"Vika? Ugh!" Again she showed those sharp little teeth.

"Why? Vika means vetch—wild peas."

"But they also call vetch 'mouse peas' and I hate mice."

"All right then. You're Vitka. And I'm Seryozha... Far to go yet?"

"Aha! Puffed out?.. We pass a forester's hut and then we can see the Big Saddle."

But the path went on and on, twisting and turning among dense trees that shut out the air and gave off a bitter, honeyish smell. At last it broadened out into a made road covered with sparkling sand as fine as powdered sugar. This led us up a wide, gentle slope to the forester's hut, a little limestone building surrounded thickly by apricot trees.

As we approached, the silence was split by a wild barking. Two huge dogs with shaggy coats of dirty white came charging at us. But they were tied by chains that slid along an overhead wire. When they reached the limit of their chains they were swung into air almost choked by their collars, their pink tongues hanging out. After a few attempts to get at us they fell to the ground gasping.

"Don't be scared, they can't reach us," said Vitka calmly.

The dogs' teeth snapped at the air only half a step away. I saw the burrs caught in the thick hair of their shoulders and the ticks, swollen with blood, on their noses. You couldn't see their eyes through that thick mass of hair. Strange that their barking had brought nobody from the hut! When I realized

that for all their rushing and tugging at their chains they couldn't get at us I felt a prickly sort of joy. On an expedition like this to cliffs and caves peopled by mysterious voices, surely you could expect fearsome guardians barring your path. And here they were—shaggy-haired, eyeless, red-mouthed dragons!

The track we were following had now narrowed down to a ribbon. The trees were neither as tall nor as thick as they had been down below. Many of them were no more than stunted bushes, some of them dead. The leaves of the others were mesh-like, gnawed away by a little, shiny-black insect. I was tired and out of temper with Vitka, who strode on ahead on her spindly legs. Suddenly we came to a clearer space and saw in front of us a slope covered with short, brownish grass. Beyond that stood a pinnacle of rock.

"That's the Devil's Finger," said Vitka without halting in her stride.

With every step we took towards this grey pillar of stone it grew higher and higher before our very eyes. By the time we had reached its dark, cool shadow it loomed far above us—no longer the Devil's finger but the Devil's tower, gloomy, mysterious, forbidding. As if answering my thoughts Vitka said:

"You'd never guess how many people have tried to climb it. Nobody could. Some of them fell and were killed; others broke their arms and legs... Oh, yes—one man, a French-

man, *did* climb it."

"How did he manage it?"

"Well, he just climbed it... But he couldn't climb down again. He went mad up there, then he starved to death. Still," she went on thoughtfully, "he *did* manage it. There's a man for you!"

We went up to the base of the rock and Vitka, lowering her voice, said: "Now, here it comes." She made a few steps back and called, not at all loudly:

"Seryozha!"

A sneaky, mocking whisper that seemed to come from deep inside the Devil's Finger repeated, straight into my ear:

"Seryozha!"

I started and despite myself stepped back suddenly from the rock. Immediately a loud ringing voice came from the sea:

"Seryozha!"

Before I could pull myself together there came down from the Devil's fingertip a heart-rending moan:

"Seryozha!"

That was too much. "What the devil!.." I burst out.

"What the devil!" rustled in my ear.

"The devil!" came a call from the sea.

"Devil!" complained someone above.

Each one of these invisible mockers had his own frightening character. The Whisperer was a quiet one, but he got a lot of venom into that insinuating voice. The Voice from

the Sea belonged to a cool, mischievous character. The Moaner from above was a real weeper-and-wailer—but a hypocrite.

"What's got into you? Why don't you shout something?" Vitka asked. But while she was still speaking a sneaky, vicious whisper crept into my ear, "Got into you!" Next came a mocking order from the sea, "Shout!" Then, through crocodile tears, a moan about some awful "Something!" Struggling with my fears I shouted:

"Sinyegoria!"

The answer came in the same three voices.

I shouted, I spoke, I whispered many different words. The echoes' ears missed nothing. Even when I could hardly hear my own voice, my words were thrown back at me. I'd now got over the worst of my fears, but the Whisperer's voice never failed to send a shiver down my spine and my heart missed a beat at each of the Moaner's sobs.

"Good-bye!" shouted Vitka and set off. I started after her, but the Whisperer managed to inject his poison even into the word of parting, the Voice from the Sea made a mockery of it and the Moaner twisted it into a tragic farewell.

Walking towards the sea we soon arrived at a rocky shelf overhanging a precipice. To right and left of us rose sheer cliffs and below was an emptiness through which my eyes at first could make out nothing. If the Devil's Finger had plunged straight into the earth it

would have left something like this horrifying chasm. After a time I could discern far below the black, inky sea hurling itself against sharp, jagged rocks that stood out like giants' teeth. Some kind of bird with widespread, lifeless wings was spiralling slowly down into these awful depths.

It seemed that there was something unfinished in all I saw, that no balance had been reached by the mighty forces which had torn from the bowels of the earth this gigantic stone finger, had split a solid mountain with this sheer cleft, had planted the giant's teeth down below and had forced the sea to tear its tender tongue against their jagged edges. Everything around and below us seemed to be unstable and ready to fall asunder under the impact of some concealed inner strain. And certainly at that time I had no idea there was a name to describe the tumultous feelings that had me in their grip on the edge of the Big Saddle.

Vitka spread herself flat on her stomach at the very edge of the precipice, and waved to me to come nearer. I lay flat out beside her on the firm, warm rock. The terrifying "pull" of the precipice vanished and I found it quite easy to look down into the depths. Stretching her head and neck well over the edge she shouted:

"Oh-ho-ho!"

A moment of silence, then a thick deep-throated voice roared back:

"Oh-ho-ho!"

There was nothing to scare you in this voice, for all its deepness and strength. Down there, obviously, lived a kind old giant who didn't wish us any harm. Vitka asked him:

"Where did the hippopotamus go?"

The giant thought that one over for a second and replied:

"Moscow!"

"You know," said Vitka without raising her head, "nobody's ever climbed down from the Big Saddle to the sea. One man tried it, but he got stuck half-way—"

"And died of starvation, of course!" I prompted mockingly.

"No. They threw him a rope and pulled him up... But I think it could be done."

"Let's try it."

"Let's," she answered so calmly that I knew she meant it.

"Some other time," I told her, with more joking in my voice than I felt inside me.

"All right. Let's go on." Then louder: "Good-bye! We shouldn't have stayed so long."

"So long!" roared the cheerful giant.

I could have stayed much longer talking to him but Vitka dragged me away.

Another echo, Vitka told me, had a thin piercing voice like glass breaking. He lived in a narrow crevice that seemed to have been made with one slice of a mighty knife. Even if you spoke to him in a deep, deep voice he would answer in a high-pitched squeal. But

one unpleasant noise wasn't enough for him: he would go on repeating that mouse-like squeak from all the crannies of his crevice. So we didn't waste much time on *him*.

Now we had to scramble up a steep slope that was covered in places with hard, rusty-brown grass and prickly plants and in other parts had a surface of bare, slippery rock. At last we reached a flattish part strewn with huge boulders, each of them resembling something—a ship; a tank, a bull, a giant's head, a fallen knight in his armour, a heavy cannon with a broken barrel, a camel, a lion with its mouth wide open in a roar, and even the scattered parts of a giant's body—his Roman nose, an ear, his lower jaw complete with beard, a mighty clenched fist, a naked foot, his forehead with traces of his curly hair.

Any word that was thrown to these petrified creatures and things would be caught up like a ball and thrown from one to the other, or, maybe, would bounce off their sides, all of this happening with lightning quickness. This was the place where Vitka's "rattling peas" echo lived.

But most remarkable of all was an echo that Vitka hadn't told me anything about. To reach him we had to crawl on our bellies, clutching at dry shrubs or anything that offered a handhold. Any stone set rolling by our hands or feet would start a cascade of bigger stones, so that below us a constant clatter was going on. When I looked over my

shoulder I was surprised to see how small was the mass of rock hanging over the sea. From where we were now the sea was no longer a level plane: it was huge, borderless and merged with the sky to make a dome that stretched over everything we could see. And, just to show us how high we were now, the Devil's Finger seemed to be no more than a little spike.

Vitka stopped beside a dark, semi-circular hole leading into the mountain. I looked in and when my eyes got used to the darkness I could make out a cave with an arched roof from which fell long beards of stone icicles. The walls threw out faint flickers of red and green and blue, and the stale air smelt so strongly of a crypt that I drew my head back quickly. Vitka leaned forward and shouted:

"Hullo, there!"

It sounded as if under this vaulted roof empty barrels were knocking against one another with a deafening "Boom!" Then came a rattling from the farthest corners and finally a mighty, long-drawn-out "A-ah!" as if the mountain itself was giving out its last breath.

I couldn't help looking at Vitka with surprise and respect. For all her freckles, her skinniness, her light, tow-coloured hair, her sharp little teeth and her shining green eyes, she seemed to me as mysterious as this secret world she had brought me into.

"Now, you shout," she ordered.

I bent forward and shouted "Oh-ho!" into the mountain's small, black mouth. Once again it started this booming and rattling, then something breathed into my face with the cold breath of a dead world. Suddenly I was overcome by a feeling of loneliness and helplessness in this stony world of mountains and cliffs and chasms and caves peopled by wild, mysterious voices.

"Let's go!" I said, unable to conceal my feelings. "Let's get out of here."

Our way back was like falling through endless space. We passed again the stony graveyard, the Devil's Finger, the stunted, tortured hazel bushes, the forester's dogs still barking and choking at the ends of their chains. Then another wood—this time full of the sap of life. It was down, down all the way until we reached the dry river-bed that made a semicircle round our village.

"Well, what do you think of it? Interesting?" asked Vitka when we reached the village street.

Now that I was back among ordinary everyday things Vitka seemed no longer the mysterious mistress of the mountain spirits, only a sharp-toothed, skinny, ugly little girl. To think that I had shown fear in front of a girl like that!

"Not bad," I said off-handedly. "But what can you do with a collection like that?"

"So nothing's any good unless you can keep it in a box in your pocket?"

"Oh, well, I don't mean that... But an echo echoes for anybody. It isn't *yours*, you know."

Vitka gave me a long, curious look. "Well, well. What does it matter? I don't care." And with a toss of her head she set off home.

We became quite good friends, Vitka and I. Together we scrambled all over Temruk-Kaya and on the Wedding Mountain we found in a little grotto an echo that croaked like a frog. But Temruk-Kaya, with all its steep slopes, its sharp peak piercing the sky and the many spurs that ran from its feet, had nobody to answer our shouts.

We were almost inseparable. I got used to Vitka bathing with nothing on. She was a good chum and I didn't think of her as a girl. I began to understand her not caring about clothes—she was quite convinced that she was an ugly little thing. I have never met anyone who accepted her lack of looks with such frankness, simplicity and dignity. When she was telling me about her girl friends at school, she said of one of them quite casually: "She's almost as ugly as I am."

Once we were bathing near the fishermen's jetty when a band of boys came round a turn in the hill path. I knew them slightly, but all my timid attempts to become one of them had failed. These boys had spent previous summers in Sinyegoria, counted themselves as "old-timers" in the village and refused to

accept any newcomer. Their leader, Igor, was a tall, strong boy.

I had had my bathe and was drying myself with a towel. Vitka was still playing about in the water. She would wait for an oncoming wave, jump high, then ride the wave-crest on her belly, her bare little bottom shining.

The boys answered my greeting casually and would have passed on, but one of them, a lad in red swimming-trunks, noticed Vitka and shouted:

"Look, lads! A girl—stark naked!"

That started it. There was a chorus of whistling, shouting and catcalls. I must say for Vitka that she simply ignored the shouts, but that only made things worse. The first boy called out: "Let's turn her up and smack her bottom." This met with general approval and he swaggered down to the water's edge. Vitka with the lightning movement of a wild animal bent down and groped about under the water; when she straightened up there was a good hefty stone in her hand.

"Come on. Just try it!" she said, baring her sharp teeth. "Come on and get your face flattened."

The boy stopped short, and dipped a toe in the water. "Ouch!" he cried, his ears redder than his trunks. "Too cold for a dip!"

Igor walked down to him and sat at the edge of the water. The other, understanding his leader's tactics, sat down beside him. The rest of them followed suit. The chain of boys

cut off Vitka from the beach, her clothes and towel.

Vitka tried to tire out the boys' patience. She swam out to sea, swam back, dived, played about in the water, sat on a submerged rock and splashed herself. But at last the cold won.

"Seryozha!" she shouted. "Bring me my knickers."

All this time I had kept on rubbing myself down with the towel. I rubbed and rubbed long after I was dry and I felt that if I went on like that I'd rub my skin off. In this pitiable state of indecision only one thing was clear: I would have nothing to do with Vitka's troubles.

"Seryozha, hand the lady her knickers," mimicked the boy in red trunks in a squeaky falsetto.

Turning round, Igor warned: "Just you try—and see what happens."

The warning was unnecessary. When Vitka saw she could get no help from me she crouched pitifully, covered her thin body as best she could with arms that were blue with cold and covered with goose-pimples, and walked out of the water. Her face twisted in a grimace, she sidled quickly to her clothes amid the laughter and catcalls of the boys. What once had appeared in her simple purity of heart as unimportant had now become something shameful, low and dirty.

Hopping on one foot while the other was

entangled in her knickers, she managed to get dressed somehow. She picked up her towel and started to run away, but stopped long enough to shout at me:

"Coward! Coward! Dirty little coward!"

No other word could have hurt me so much. And I felt it was quite unjust. Vitka should have known that it wasn't Igor's fists I was frightened of. But apparently she wanted to humiliate me once and for all in the eyes of the boys.

Perhaps it was a bit of bravado on the part of a leader who refused to follow the example of his band, or perhaps something about Vitka had aroused his interest, but Igor suddenly asked in quite friendly tones:

"Is she off her rocker a bit?"

"Of course she is," I answered, eagerly seizing this opening.

"Then why are you always going around with her?"

Thinking only of myself and without any idea of showing Vitka in a better light, I said:

"Well, it's fun to be with her. She collects echoes."

"Eh?.. What's that?"

In my servile gratitude to Igor I blurted out all Vitka's secrets.

"Now that's really something," said Igor admiringly. "I've been here three summers but I've never heard of anything like that."

"Stretching it a bit, aren't you?" piped up the boy in red trunks.

"I'll take you there if you like."

"Right," said Igor in his leader's voice. "Tomorrow you show us the places."

The morning was drizzly.

The mountains were lathered with bluey-white clouds, and the roaring of swollen rivulets added to the gloomy note of the sea, now the rusty colour of the mountain grass.

But Igor's band refused to put off the expedition, and once again the familiar path twisted and turned under my feet. Across it now ran a noisy stream of murky yellow that rolled pebbles downhill with it. The forest no longer smelt of bitter honey but of decaying leaves and rain-sodden earth with something rotting inside it that stank of sour wine. Walking was difficult; your feet slithered in all directions on the wet earth and the smooth patches of rock.

At the forester's hut we were greeted with the same choking barks, but in the misty air the sound was muffled and softer. The dogs themselves were less terrifying, for their shaggy coats had been flattened by the rain, and now their olive-black eyes were no longer hidden by shocks of hair.

And there again were the stunted, insect-eaten hazel bushes. The wind and the rain had torn off their few remaining leaves and through their sad, naked branches you could see the dreary darkness of the sea. We walked on for a long time before we could get a

glimpse of the Devil's Finger through the clouds. For a second we saw its dark tip but at once it became dissolved in the whirling mist. Although the wind was blowing towards the sea, the clouds, light as your breath on a frosty day, were moving the other way. One moment they'd sweep along the ground making our clothes clammy, the next moment they'd vanish, settling down as dew.

At last the Devil's Finger moved towards us from out of this maze and barred our way.

"Now, let's see your bag of tricks," said Igor quietly.

"Listen!" I said solemnly, and once again felt that chill running down my backbone. I made a mouthpiece of my two hands and shouted:

"Oh-ho-ho!"

Silence.

No sneaky whisper in my ears. No mocking laughter from the sea. No moaning from above. Nothing.

"Oh-ho-ho!" I shouted again, stepping nearer to the face of the rock. One after another the boys took up the cry. The Devil's Finger was dumb. We tried again and again, but not a sound came.

I rushed along to the Big Saddle, the boys hot on my heels. There I took a deep breath and shouted as loud as I could into the swirling, misty depths. But the cheerful giant hadn't a word to throw back to me.

At a loss I rushed back to the Devil's

Finger, from there to the crevice, back to the cliff-edge and once again to the Devil's Finger, but the mountains were silent—silent.

With tears in my voice I pleaded with the boys to climb with me to the mountain's mouth—there, surely, the echo wouldn't fail me!—but they just stood around me, surly and silent as the mountains themselves. Then Igor's mouth opened to let out one word:

"Boaster!"

He turned on his heel and walked away, followed by his band. I trudged gloomily after them, trying to puzzle out what had happened. Much more important to me than the boys' contempt was the mystery of my failure. Could it be that the echoes answered only Vitka's voice? No, that couldn't explain it, for when we were together they answered my voice as well as hers... Perhaps she had some kind of key that could lock the voices in their stony dwellings?

Sad days followed. I had lost Vitka as a companion and even my mother wasn't very friendly. When I told her the puzzling story of the silent echoes she eyed me up and down as if she was looking at a stranger and said:

"It's all very simple—the mountains answer only those who are good and true."

Her words made clear many things to me, but the mystery of the echoes remained.

The rains continued and the sea seemed to be divided in two parts: in the bay it was

a murky yellow from the sand washed down by the swollen streams; further out it shone pure and transparent. The wind blew constantly. In the daytime it swung a grey curtain of rain to and fro; at night the skies were clear and starry and then it was a dry, black wind—black because it always showed itself that way, in the black, restless twigs and branches and the tree-trunks, and in the charcoal-black shadows thrown across the less dark patches.

Several times I caught a glimpse of Vitka. She went down to the beach in any weather and managed to snatch a good coating of sunburn from the stingy little spells of sunshine. Out of boredom I now went with my mother to the market where we bought local produce—vegetables, apricots, goats' milk and curds. One day I saw Vitka at the market. She was alone. I watched as she moved about among the milk-cans and the counters in those same yellow and blue striped knickers, watched her choosing a piece of meat and putting it on the scales or selecting tomatoes in a very business-like way. I felt a jab of pain for I knew it was a good friend I had lost.

In the morning of the first sunny day I was moving about the apricot orchard picking up windfalls that already showed squashy patches of rot. I heard my name called. By our gate stood a little girl in a navy blue skirt and a white blouse with a blue sailor collar.

After a moment I saw it was Vitka. Her bleached hair was smoothly brushed and gath-

ered with a ribbon at the back. On her sunburnt neck was a string of coral beads and on her feet elk-hide sandals. I rushed towards her.

"You know ... we're leaving," she told me.

"Why?"

"Mother's tired of everything here... You know what? I want to leave you my collection. I don't need it. But you can show it to the boys and make it up with them."

"Shan't show it to anybody," I exclaimed hotly.

"Please yourself. But in any case you can have it. You know why it didn't work with you?"

"How d'you know it didn't work?"

"Well, I just heard... Anyhow, do you know the reason?"

"No."

"It's like this. The main thing is the place where you're standing when you shout." Vitka lowered her voice conspiratorially. "At the Devil's Finger you shout from the sea side. You must have stood somewhere else. Then, by the cliff-edge you've got to hang well over and shout straight into the face of the cliff. Remember how I made you bend your head? Then, at the crevice you shout straight into its depths so that your voice carries. At the cave you always get an answer—only you didn't go there. The same with the rattling peas."

I felt a rush of words coming to my lips

but all I got out was her name. Screwing up her thin face she said:

"Well, I must be running or I'll miss the bus."

"See you in Moscow?"

Vitka shook her head. "We're from Kharkov."

"Won't you be coming here again?"

"Don't know... Well, so long! " She hung her head perplexedly for a moment, then ran off.

I found that mother was standing by my side at the gate, looking fixedly at Vitka's retreating figure.

"Who's that?" she asked, and I noticed a strangely happy note in her voice.

"That's Vitka ... she lives at Tarakanikha's, you know."

"What a lovely little creature! " she said with a good deal of feeling in her voice.

"Oh, no! " I said. "It's *Vitka*. I told you."

"I heard you first time." Again she looked along the street after Vitka. "What a wonderful little girl! That nice little snub nose, that lovely ash-blonde hair, really striking eyes, trim little figure, slender hands and feet."

"But, mother! " I protested, annoyed by this strange blindness—a blindness that, to me, didn't seem quite fair to Vitka. "You should have seen her mouth! "

"I did—a wonderful, generous mouth! You just don't understand a single thing about her."

Mother went on into the house. I stood for a second or two watching her back. Then I pulled myself together and started running to the bus station.

The bus was still there. The last passengers, loaded with suitcases and bags, were struggling to get inside. I spotted Vitka sitting next to a window. Beside her was a plump, dark-haired woman in a red dress, her mother.

Vitka saw me and wrestled with the catches to lower the window. Her mother said something and put her hand on her shoulder as if to restrain her. Vitka shrugged off her mother's hand.

The engine roared and the bus moved off slowly along the unpaved road, leaving behind it a trail of golden dust. I walked alongside it. Biting her lip, Vitka wrenched at the catch and the window clattered down. How much easier to think of Vitka as beautiful when she wasn't there before your eyes! Those sharp teeth and the spattering of freckles ruined the image of her that mother had created and I had accepted.

"Listen, Vitka! " I began quickly. "Mother says you're beautiful. Your hair is beautiful. Your eyes, mouth, nose..." The bus gathered speed and I broke into a run. "Your hands, your feet... Really, Vitka! "

Vitka's only answer was a joyful smile with that big mouth of hers, a broad, trustful smile that showed all the goodness of her heart; and at that moment with my own eyes

I saw that Vitka really was the most beautiful girl in the world.

The bus, heavily loaded, reached the wooden bridge over the stream that marked the boundary of Sinyegoria. I stopped. The bridge shook and gave out a rumbling sound. Vitka's head appeared in the window again, and I saw her sharp, sun-burnt elbow and her ash-blonde hair fluttering in the breeze. She waved to me, and threw a silver coin back across the stream. The coin's glittering trail died in the dust at my feet. It's said that if you throw a coin here then one day you're sure to come back...

Now I couldn't wait for us to leave Sinyegoria. Then I could throw a coin as well, and I would meet Vitka again.

But it wasn't to be. A month later, when we finally left, I forgot about throwing a coin.

YOU SHALL LIVE

He often went to the third floor, to the therapeutic department for women patients in a spacious, rumbling service lift used for wheel stretchers and food-trolleys. The lift attendant was a stern old woman with a fleshy wart-dotted face. The white hospital smock was stretched tightly over her huge bosom and the seams split at the armpits. When the lift would stop higher than the floor level she pressed a small lever and setting it down muttered angrily, "You devil," as at a mettlesome horse.

Kravtsov, his head lowered, his whole attitude showing that he was not looking at the patients who walked along the corridor in their short, badly fitting hospital dressing-gowns, or who lay inside the wards behind the glass doors, quickly made his way to his mother's ward. And yet every detail of the hospital scene always registered in his brain:

walking patients' beds covered with thin grey blankets, bed-side tables cluttered with medicine phials, glasses, bottles, books or magazines, bed-pans half showing from under the beds; women of various ages—mostly old, some middle-aged, very few young—all with earthy-grey faces and a tortured look in lusterless eyes. It was a unit for serious cases. The patients were immersed in their pain, fear, hopes, doubts. They lost the sense of shame, it was all the same to them how they looked to the passing visitors. Next to his mother's ward there lay a woman of about fifty who for several days had hovered on the brink of death, her small grey head thrown back on the pillow. The skin on her sunken cheeks was dark, her mouth was slightly open but so still it seemed she was no longer breathing. The blanket slipped down to her feet while the night-dress rolled up to her neck, and down from that swarthy, veined neck her body was strangely youthful, it was like marble—white, perfectly moulded, immobile. There was something sinful, Kravtsov thought, something indecent in his noticing the beauty of that tormented body. He quickened his step.

His every visit to the hospital seemed to evoke anxiety and surprise in mother. Her faded grey-blue eyes would grow round, her lips trembled, a withered hand would jerkily begin to tug at the collar of her night-dress. Kravtsov became resigned to that faked

surprise, accepting it as mother's way of telling him that she did not expect him to come, that he really did not have to visit her every day.

"No, no," he would say, joining in the game, "everything is fine. I just happened to get an hour free."

These free hours "just happened" every day but Kravtsov never forgot to stress that it was a chance occurrence, because he knew that while mother did not want to impose on the regular, minute by minute established order of his life, she at the same time feared a day without him. She knew, of course, that he could not miss coming. She knew, yet she could not help fearing the chance of his not coming and she was always anxious and worried.

Kravtsov sat down on a white wooden stool, linked his hands over one knee and bending slightly forward, turned his narrow face with a hesitant smile towards his mother. She returned the smile with a sly, conspiratorial air. There was nothing for them to conspire about, yet there was something between them that belonged to them alone and was not to be shared with anyone else.

"When will they move me to a general ward?" mother asked.

"They have no vacant places there."

"Nonsense, patients come and go all the time."

"Then consider this individual room a

punishment. You should've known better than try to stand in for the night nurse."

"But she had to take her physics exam next day. She was cramming. The poor girl had already failed twice in that subject."

"You had no business to get up so soon after the operation. Now you are paying for your recklessness by this lonely existence."

"I don't mind being alone, I just feel ashamed, it is not that I am such a serious case really."

Kravtsov clenched his fingers tighter. A bit of growth the size of an apple had been cut out of mother's body, followed by a course of X-ray treatment. The results were still uncertain. The danger of a second operation still loomed. And mother was seventy-eight and had a heart condition.

"You did not ask them to give me a separate room, did you? Now tell me honestly."

"No."

Didn't she understand how completely her principles of life had permeated his whole being? Never to ask for anything special, or to use any privileges, to love your work for its own sake and never for the advantages it may offer. That was why at the age of fifty he was still only acting director of his research institute; and he refused to accept a Doctor's degree just on the basis of his published works without the official procedure of defending the thesis.

Yet he suspected that mother was moved to a separate room not without the influence of his name known in the circle connected with his branch of science. This was something he was powerless to prevent for he always stopped at the line beyond which modesty became hypocrisy. However mother, a granddaughter of an old revolutionary, would never consent to any compromise—whether prompted by tactfulness, leniency to human weaknesses or just weariness.

They fell silent. Mother began to eat the grapes he brought her. She ate eagerly, completely engrossed in the slow and laborious effort. Kravtsov could not help thinking that illness seemed to bring out mother's age. Not because of the wrinkled, flabby, dark-spotted skin on her face and hands, or the grey thinning hair, but because of the growing senility of spirit. Formerly she would have never allowed herself to eat so greedily. In general, she had always eaten little. She needed a very small amount of fuel to keep the fire going. Short, thin, with precise gestures, light movements and a graceful gait, she never allowed life's hardships to lead her away from the kingdom of Ariel. She was now frankly enjoying the "tasty treat", forgetful of everything around, her son included.

He understood why this scene irritated, even angered him. He feared every change in mother, every deviation from the established image. At her age only lack of change was a

blessing, every deviation from the usual meant illness and decay. Mother had watched her son grow and mature. She saw the gradual transformation of an embryo into a man. While he received his mother ready-made, completely moulded once and for all. Naturally, she too was subject to the changes brought on by life, but he did not feel or notice them, till recently he never noticed even any changes in her outward appearance. Mother seemed to age unnoticeably, without any grievous losses. He himself grew older, everything around grew older, the whole surrounding world grew older—and then, having reached a certain point, froze in that dignified state. However, the age gap between him and his mother remained constant and that guaranteed the immutability of her image. Then suddenly mother seemed to have rushed into an irrevocable, real old age; and he failed to notice this till the day when he saw her in the hospital bed.

Mother was still avidly eating the juicy grapes. Probably she needed them to gain the strength for recuperation. She never cared much for grapes, and perhaps she was conscientiously making herself eat them now so that their nourishing strength would flow over into her blood? This thought made mother's greediness appear in a different light—it was an effort, not an easy effort for a gravely ill person, and Kravtsov felt grateful to mother for trying to get better.

At the gravest time of her illness Kravtsov had been afraid that mother, having been used to spend all her strength, physical and moral, on him, on his health, well-being, mood—on family affairs—had no store of strength left for herself. She appeared to him absolutely defenceless against her illness and the threat of death. But she bore with remarkable fortitude the grim diagnosis, the often contradictory views and decisions of the doctors, the operation, the tormenting, unbearable minutes on the operating table, waiting while the extracted piece of tumour was examined to see if a further, more radical operation was needed or whether they might put in the stitches, then the sudden news after two weeks of joyous relief that the test had given positive results (in medicine every positive result has an ominous meaning) and that another, more serious operation was needed under a general anesthetic, and the latest turn of events when they discovered that the results of the analysis were read incorrectly and instead of the second operation she was to undergo a course of X-ray treatment.

What surprised and gladdened him was not mother's courage—she had always held her chin up with never a groan or a complaint no matter how hard the trials of life, it was the show of some hidden strength in her. Undoubtedly by her attitude *she helped* the doctors and the surgeons in their fight for her life. In medicine much is done by intuition

and by guess-work, even when there are all the analyses, which different doctors read differently; the same goes for cardiograms and X-ray pictures. They appear to be something like abstract painting in which every viewer sees what corresponds to his own mood and conception. To a great extent the curing of a patient depends on himself—on his will-power, intellect, love of life and the ability of concentration. Mother possessed all these qualities. And besides, she could not leave her fifty-year-old son to the whims of fate. She knew that neither his quietly and loyally loving wife, nor his daughter who reciprocated her father's tenderness with a slightly condescending camaraderie, nor those few people whom he respected and called friends—for the lack of real friends who never came back from war—that none of these people could take the place of his old mother. That was how it had turned out with them, for better or for worse. Until mother fell ill he never gave it a thought. Is it good to breathe? Of course it is, but would it ever occur to any of us to exclaim: "How wonderful it is to breathe the air!" It is just a natural condition of existence for us. But a man who escapes from some stuffy cellar, or a deep cave, or climbs from under a collapsed building would suddenly experience the unique, supreme happiness of breathing air. Kravtsov realised the closeness of his own being with mother's in a similar way. Her hovering

between life and death meant his hovering between happiness and grief.

"Go on, try your hardest," Kravtsov repeated to himself as he watched mother eating the grapes.

The branches of a tall elm swayed beyond the window. They seemed to be trying to get rid of the yellowing but still sturdy leaves. But the leaves refused to budge. Only one, criss-crossed with the swollen reddish scars of some plant disease, broke loose and fluttering in the wind, fell down on mother's bed-side table.

Kravtsov remembered that at first he took that tree for a lime, then called it an ash tree and only recently recognised the old friend in it. In the courtyard of their house on the other side of the Moskva River grew huge elms towering higher than the nearby Pyatnitskaya Church. Lately the names of all the trees, bushes and grasses growing in the hospital park had come back to him. The ash tree, the lime, the willow, the hawthorn, the barberry, the meadow-sweet—he suddenly began to remember them all after a long separation, caused by his hopelessly urban life; the names came back with no prompting from outside.

Years ago mother would make it a point to tell him the names of all the trees, bushes, flowers, grasses, animals, birds, fishes, insects. She took care that her child should live in the world of known, recognisable things, not in

the realm of nameless strangers. "You know, a cockchafer flew from a goose-foot to a camomile and chased away a ladybird," he would joyously inform his mother... In the succeeding years he subconsciously relieved himself of this detailed knowledge of the world, falling back on the elemental generalised conceptions: "A beetle flew from one blade of grass to another and scared away an insect."

Why then did he suddenly remember and recognise everything again? What had brought it all back to him? In fact he had all but lost the faculty of automatic memory. He would often forget his home telephone number, he mixed up the names of his friends and colleagues, often mistook Wednesday for Friday. But apart from petty mishaps and inconveniences caused by this, Kravtsov was not particularly upset by the loss of this primitive memory, because his imaginative memory became if anything only more acute. He suspected that the return of all the earthlings' names was not connected with the automatic memory but with something much more important and profound, perhaps with something most significant and deep-seated in his essential being.

"Do you remember the ice-rink?" he heard mother's voice. "The little boy couldn't skate at all, he waddled over the ice like a duck and then how he devoured that honey-bun!"

Kravtsov smiled.

"I should say I remember him! And the huge bun as well, dark brown and really smelling of honey."

"I think that for him the main attraction of the ice-rink was that honey-bun," mother said merrily. "I'm so glad we met those people, every memory of them warms the heart."

A bit of colour appeared in her sunken cheeks and a sparkle lit up her eyes. She raised herself up against the pillows and suddenly became her old familiar self.

They continued talking about those people they met at the time when Kravtsov was quite small, before he even started school. The other boy was the same age but was already going to school and behaved accordingly—an older, stronger, wiser friend conscious of his responsibility for his younger companion. He had the same knightly, protective attitude towards his mother—a young, beautiful woman who looked more like his older sister than his mother. They were very much alike—mother and son—dark-haired, brown-eyed, rosy-cheeked.

Yes, he could almost see them again, feel their fresh breath... And yet... Had they really existed or had they been imagined or rather put together like mosaics, out of tiny pieces of reality and fancy? It is hard to analyse how family legends come into being, this private mist-enveloped mythology.

Mother had first spoken of them on the day after the operation. "Do you remember

them?" she asked in wistful, imploring voice. And Kravtsov at once, with a gladness surprising for himself, remembered the charming couple. They were charming in their appearance, in their attitude to each other—free, tender, considerate—in their readiness to take pleasure in everything: the chance passers-by they met, the walks they took, the snowdrifts they saw, the few horses in the streets, everything delighted them. When they appeared everything around lit up as on a joyous holiday. And then they left, much too soon, leaving behind a feeling of loss.

Mother, restrained in her illness, as always before, livened up when they started talking about that couple. By the way it was she who called them a "couple", not quite the right word to use. Kravtsov too felt a warm wave sweep over his heart when they recalled various details of their short meeting. All these simple details would have been meaningless for other people, but for them they were dear and important. Mother remembered much more than he, more than seemed to be possible, but somehow this did not surprise Kravtsov.

But where had that delightful couple come from and why had they disappeared? Why did they not leave any tangible trace of their existence? Neither a telephone number jotted down in an old notebook, nor an old postcard, nor a trifling present on some appropriate occasion? And why, having become so close,

had they disappeared so completely? There had been no quarrel, no offence, no hint of any misunderstanding. Perhaps they had just gone away from Moscow? Most likely, but if so, why was there no last meeting, no farewells, at least a telephone call in parting? Perhaps a sudden departure which leaves no time for goodbyes or telephone calls—that would seem to be the only plausible explanation, though still doubtful. He certainly could ask mother about it, she seemed to remember everything so well. But Kravtsov knew that he would never ask her, and today he realised for the first time why he would not do it.

Mother brought him up the hard way. He never saw his father who was killed in the Civil War. Mother avoided talking about him. She was ready enough to answer any of her son's questions, but her answers were short and precise as in a questionnaire. He needed something quite different, and having realised that he would never get that from her he stopped asking about father altogether. Mother took upon herself all the responsibility of bringing up her son, she did not seem to need any moral support from a husband. Kravtsov could never guess what place his father had in his mother's heart. Sometimes he thought that mother became numb from grief she could not overcome, sometimes he thought that mother had never loved her husband, that she just wanted a child and a priori was ready to bring up that child all on her

own. His father's name was Kirill Alexandrovich Osokin, but Kravtsov was registered under his mother's maiden name.

However, mother was afraid that the lack of male presence in the family might have a bad influence on her son's character. So he was brought up in a Spartan style. As far back as he could remember he was forbidden to cry and had never once seen mother crying. Even when he left for the front mother remained calm: "Good luck, son," she said, "write to me." She did not go to see him off, did not even look out of the window. Even when he was very small, even on his birthdays she never kissed him. She would shake his hand and give him a present. A hundred years of silence—that could well describe their close-knit life in the tiny flat of an old Moscow house. It was not the silence of indifference or coldness but the silence of a painful and strong love, a love afraid of crippling its most dearly cherished being by the show of weakness, pity or tears. Had his father been there mother would have probably behaved differently. But there was no counter-influence to the feminine, the tender, and so she herself became hard as steel.

Kravtsov himself never felt any deficiency. Naturally, he saw that his friends had different relations with their parents, but he did not envy them, he watched all coddling and cooing with fastidious condescention. Mother's company was unfailingly interesting. She was

tireless in opening up to him the surrounding world of nature, books, art, people—living and dead—history, geography, archaeology. All this roused in him the sense of involvement with the entire world. He always marvelled how mother, a mere translator of technological literature with an incomplete school education, managed to know so much.

No matter what they happened to talk about—their own experience, or a book they had read, no matter what they did together—room-cleaning, vegetable planting, mushroom or cucumber salting, or getting his things ready for the army—some inner contact would spring up between them, elevating the everyday reality to the level of some higher life. And yet, a hundred years of silence was their lot. How much tenderness they had smothered inside themselves, how many silly, funny, useless and so important words they had left unspoken, how many tears they had choked, how many feelings and emotional outbursts they had cut short!

Perhaps they had never before felt their incompleteness so acutely as on the day when mother's school friend came to visit them with her son. They were very attractive, with dark hair, brown eyes and glowing skin—mother and son, irresistible in their cheerful kindness and completely relaxed behaviour. The four of them spent the whole day together, they went to the cinema, was it *The Three Musketeers* with Duglas Fairbanks?

They drank tea with wild strawberry jam, leafed through an illustrated edition of *Baron Münchhausen*... Then he and mother stood on the staircase landing watching their guests disappear down the dark staircase. And that was all. The lovely mother and her son went back home to the Far East.

They came to life again in this hospital ward after the most fearful hours in Kravtsov's life; and after serving in the infantry during the war there was no need of a descent to this special hell to know the meaning of fear.

Mother was the first to speak of them. Kravtsov responded eagerly and so the two of them joined in the reconstruction of the picture of the charming "couple". The more details they recalled the happier they grew—actually they were not talking of those half-strangers but of themselves, of what happened to them and what could have happened. They now gave free rein to everything they had suppressed in their hearts in the hundred years of silence—everything they had tried so hard to suppress but which refused to disappear.

The nurse on duty looked in several times and though she did not say anything Kravtsov knew it was time to go. Despite his usual tactfulness and his respect for rules, he always overstayed his visits and had to be asked to leave. However this time the medical staff was exceptionally tolerant.

When he at last rose mother said, with no

loss of animation: "We probably won't see each other tomorrow. I'll have to be operated on again."

"Why?" Misled by the carefree tone Kravtsov felt no alarm at first.

"I had a haemorrhage. Nothing serious. The result of an overdoze of a stimulant. It's not what you'd really call an operation, no need to worry."

Out in the corridor again he quickly walked past the white marble-like body of the immobile woman and emerged onto the cool landing; he ran down the stairs and dived into the twilight of the park. Only when he reached the nearby wasteland he became conscious that the park with its elms, limes and maples was also saturated with the persistent hospital smell.

Kravtsov looked up at the dark blue sky above his head and thought: What a pity that after all there is no God. I'd much sooner believe in his power to perform with mother the miracles that he performed in the Bible than all the optimistic promises of the medics. What if this second operation is needed because of a further aggravation in her ailment? Ailment indeed! A feeble, flabby word. It's a curse, a nightmare of humanity, an evil sign under which all of us are born... So once more that descent to the hell of anguish, fear, anxiety...

Why couldn't he scream? Why were not his lips twisted into a grimace of pain? Why were

his eyes dry? A lot of people passed him by without giving him a glance, evidently his face showed nothing. But then these people too might have been going either to or from the hospital; and nearby there was a railway station where people parted for long or short periods, and beyond that a cemetery, where people parted forever. But as you looked at those passers-by you'd never think there was a sorrow in the world. And at that moment he seemed to hear how the habitual and therefore unnoticeable hum of a city suburb was pierced by strange, high-pitched sounds—groans, sobs and wails. The hidden voices of human pain, and among them his own voice—the long-stifled scream breaking out of his tightly pressed lips.

Why are we all so shamefully unprepared to accept death—our own and that of our dear ones? Because of its very naturalness and inevitability death cannot and must not be taken as a tragedy. The reason probably lies in the fact that we do not live even half our allotted time. We all die too early, before we have time to wear out our earthy incarnations, to achieve complete self-realisation in work, creativity, love, even before we become fully conscious of our existence. We die in our childhood, in adolescence, in youth, in maturity, and in exceptional cases—in ripe old age. I cannot accept my young, seventy-eight-year-old mother's departure. We have not had enough time to talk to each other, to

look at each other, to breathe in each other's presence. We have hardly managed to get to know each other. And look, we have to part. A monstrous injustice!

And yet man is only coming into being, Kravtsov thought, we are at the very early stage of formation—physically, morally, intellectually. We are amazed when we watch the athletes lift a weight of over 650 kilograms in a triple combination, but a man ought to lift this weight at one go if he learns to use all his inherent strength. Once I saw a skinny, narrow-chested schizophrenic scatter around a whole wedding party. Sheer fury released in that weakling the real store of human strength and he lifted and threw about the huge hefty fellows like small kittens...

Kravtsov walked towards the railway bridge. There was a freight station nearby. The small shunting engines puffed and hissed as they pulled about the loaded and empty trucks, preceding each of their movements with a shrill, ear-splitting whistle. The whistles, the specific tar-smoke smell of the railway lines suddenly brought back to Kravtsov his childhood. Not a memory of it, no, the childhood itself. The sensation struck him under his jutting shoulder blades and made him gasp for breath, his fingertips grew numb.

He was physically aware of his childish body and of his childish longing for his mother—the smell of tar and slag was always linked with partings.

Mother's illness gave back to him the sense of the tangibility of nature, with all the names possessed by the growing, blossoming, breathing world, it gave him back his childhood and the primacy of the long-dulled emotions. He had lived the last decades of his life in a half-hearted, dull way. He had not bothered to be brilliant, he just marked time at the approaches to the truth, never making a decisive step to reach it. Narrow professionalism is the death of creative science. A powerful blow was needed to knock him off the orbit of routine and take him back to himself—the child, the trembling child holding his breath at the sight of an old elm or the rain-washed railway lines, and to make him carry out the mission of his life.

And at that moment he made that great discovery which many a first-class intellect has failed to reach. He discovered the prime source of all existence, the beginning of all the beginnings, he found the answer to the question that torments the child as well as a grey-haired sage—whence has everything started? The answer came to him not in the form of an abstract mathematical formula but in the most simple words understandable for every mortal. He was staggered not so much by the discovery itself as by the simplicity, the stark obviousness of what had seemed to be a deep secret. The answer was staring everybody in the face and one could only marvel at the inability of human thought to

free itself of the routine stereotypes.

But then, do we realise that ancient Egyptians lived in two-dimensional world, that ancient Greeks did not know the concept of time? A public announcement of Kravtsov's discovery would stagger mankind more than the discovery of the atom. However, the succeeding generations would only shrug their shoulders in ironic amazement at the strange inability of their predecessors to understand the essence of existence.

Had there not been mother's illness there would have been no discovery. Suffering engenders great creative power. Mother, by falling ill, had awakened in him that power. With the keenness of her love's insight she discerned long ago that he had stopped moving, that he was only simulating, albeit unconsciously, the activity of the intellect. The cold, stern upbringing, with its arguable advantage of steeling the character, is pregnant with a serious danger of freezing the springs that feed inspiration and foresight. And so mother achieved a feat of love to save her son.

And now when he had been saved for creative work, thought and inspiration, she wanted to go on living. Could it be that he had no strength to repay mother's exploit with an equally powerful effort on his side? She definitely could not be left to rely on her own undermined strength.

My turn has come, Kravtsov thought, the

two of us together shall conquer Death. I just have to summon up all my power of love and faith, the conviction in our absolute necessity for each other and in the impossibility of existence without each other. I must call to my aid every memory of the past, the entire meaning of the present and the future.

"You shall live, Mother," he suddenly said aloud as if his mother could hear him in this damp twilight smothering the outlines of the water-tower, the train trucks, the railway lines...

When he crossed the railway bridge Kravtsov looked back. On the top of the small rise, above the tall elms, he could see the outline of the hospital roof and he again repeated as a prayer, a charm, a command: "You shall live, Mother!"

Kravtsov's wife woke up in the middle of the night seized by some vague alarm. Her husband was not by her side. She did not have to turn on the light to see at once his tall, lean figure by the window. He had been complaining about insomnia lately, but refused to take sleeping pills. He stood in his old dressing gown never taking his eyes off the dark window. For a moment, still half asleep, she thought she saw a feeble greenish glow spreading around his head. The air was saturated with ozone as after a thunder-storm, though what thunder-storm could there be in that wet, grey autumn weather? She sighed and

closed her eyes.

Kravtsov stood at the window absolutely still summoning all his will-power against Death.

THE GREEN BIRD WITH THE BRIGHT RED HEAD

The milk-woman had not come, she had probably been having problems with her husband again. But Pavlov could not allow the twins to go without milk, so he took the milk-can and set off to walk the six kilometres to Kurynovo. He would be late for work at the sanatorium again, of course, where they were building a dining-hall, but that was nothing when compared to the necessity that the twins should have their milk today as on other days.

It was not so long ago that Pavlov had been able to live in such a way that one set of duties did not interfere with the other: his love for his family was not a hindrance to his work; and his enthusiasm for his work, the construction of the huge hotel in Moscow's Zaryadie, was of no harm to his family. After his war-ravaged youth, the loss of his close family, his terrible illness and the years of

want, he had been trying to create for himself a measured and orderly existence. But everything flew to the devil one day when the doctor prodded at and listened to the twins, peered meticulously at the dark X-ray photographs, and pronounced: "Their lungs are weak, they would be better living in the country."

Pavlov's heart was shattered by an intolerable feeling of guilt, for this was the return of what had first shown itself in the late autumn of '42, in the bogs and marshes of the Volkhov Front. Washing his hands and face under a field water-tap near the dug-out, Lieutenant Pavlov had spat out a lump of mucus, thick with blood, onto the white hoar-frost which was scattered like salt around on the stiffened marsh grass. "Scurvy," he said to himself, knowing full well that it wasn't scurvy, because he had a constant weakness throughout his body, he had fits of cold sweat and night fever. But scurvy explained the crimson patch on the hoar-frost; and scurvy was quite likely, as many of the others suffered from it. The Volkhov Front, although linked directly with Moscow by three railway lines—via Vishera, Nebolchi and Tikhvin—was but poorly supplied, as though it was intended that it should, in some small measure, share in the fate of the besieged city of Leningrad which it, the Volkhov Front, had yet been totally unable to liberate.

"Scurvy," Pavlov continued to persuade

himself all the following days, weeks and months until the offensive which, like everyone around him, he awaited like believers await the Second Coming. Everyone knew that the offensive would come, that this time it would not end in failure, and that the ring around Leningrad would at last be broken. Lieutenant Pavlov therefore hid from himself and from others the illness which was eating away at his lungs. He was criminally short-sighted: he thought it concerned only his own body and his own health. His mother and sister, all the family he had, had already died of hunger in the siege of Leningrad, so that he had no other reason to live but to play his part in raising the blockade. And his hour came: he saw, near the small town of Mga, the soldiers of the Volkhov Front rush to meet the soldiers of the Leningrad Front as the siege was lifted, but then he was hit by a splinter from an exploding shell; he spent years in hospital, half way between life and death, making a tortuously slow recovery, until he started a new life two years after the war had ended. There followed his difficult studies in the institute, living on the bread-line, and a recurrence of his illness, and the depression of not being able to believe in his physical stability. But this period passed and, approaching forty, Pavlov began to believe he could live like everyone else, get married and have children...

He married suddenly, quickly and not at all

because he loved this, his latest, girl-friend more than others. Their getting married was decided by a single gesture. One morning, before they parted, she lifted her hands to gather up her flowing hair into a bun. Her pose at that moment struck Pavlov by its resemblance to something which hid a secret joy. It was a strange joy, which at first he was unable to comprehend. As he thought about it, continually recalling the image of the well-built woman with her calm head slightly bowed and her powerful and rounded arms raised up, he admired this frozen movement, so full of patient strength, femininity and reassurance, and he saw her, at this moment, like a caryatid. His joy foretold that he could, without fear, lay the burden of family life and of his own weakness on her shoulders. And it turned out that, in the infinite variety of the world, the caryatid needed this lanky civil engineer with only one lung and with cheeks that were thin and sunken.

At this difficult point in his life, after the doctor had pronounced his verdict, Pavlov realised that he had made no mistake on that distant morning when, by dint alone of the gesture of her strong and rounded arms as they moved slowly and smoothly towards her abundant hair, he had foreseen the life-saving power of his future companion in joy and grief. His wife now took everything on herself. With unimaginable rapidity and an imperceptible expenditure of energy she

found, thirty kilometres from Moscow, a small village on the edge of a young pine forest and on the banks of a clear, bright river, where there was a habitable house for sale at a fair price. Next to the village was a sanatorium where building works were under way and a chief engineer was required; nearby also was an excellent school in need of an English teacher, and Pavlov's wife up to that time had been employed to translate scientific and technical texts from the English.

The twins accepted the change to their new way of life as something right and proper. They joined in the country life with confidence and good spirits, as though they had long been preparing for it. Pavlov himself, his wife, and their parents and grandparents had all been bred in the city, but Pavlov's more distant forebears had been of good peasant stock in the Pskov district; and the affinity of these forebears with the pure world of nature had been handed down so fully intact to the two young city-dwellers that they felt not a moment's dismay or confusion in the world of trees, grass, birds, broad perspectives and open sky. They quickly became at home in the garden and its surrounds; even the squirrel, which inhabited the garden, at once began to run up onto their shoulders.

The boys were in excellent health, they took on a lovely tan, which withstood even the winter, as though they had changed their skin; they grew physically stronger, and some-

thing of an animal grace appeared in their movements. And Pavlov once more began to feel a gentle thrill, the sort of feeling which people, whom life has once terrified, experience in place of happiness.

Pavlov was now going to buy milk, swinging the can as he walked, and all around him was a deep-blue and sunny day in late October, tinny and brittle with the early-morning frost; his long, thin shadow ran obediently by his side, trailing just a little way behind, passing over the patch of brown and frosted burdock, over the wooden fencing, and across the trunks of the birch trees. He winked at his shadow which, although it was looking a little sorry for itself, nevertheless belonged to a smart and lucky fellow.

As he left the village he came to the wide meadow running down to the river. The meadow was crossed by the main road and by several footpaths, the edges of their ruts and grooves looking shaggy and hairy in the hoar-frost. On the left, behind the stone wall of the sanatorium's grounds, he could see the unfinished dining-hall; on the right, to where he now bent his steps, was the pine forest, beginning nearby as a grove of recently-planted saplings and becoming further away the dark-blue mass of the old forest, where the tall pines thrust their straight trunks into the sky. The young grove was open from end to end in corridors which were as straight as a taut string. This spot was particularly beautiful

at sunset, when the end of each corridor seemed to burn with a deep red fire. A wide cutting through the trees led to the high-voltage line, from where there was a direct path to Kurynovo.

Hardly had Pavlov entered the grove when he was filled, as so often, with a strange feeling of anxiety. For it was in this grove, as the twins assured him, that there lived an amazing bird with a green body and a bright red head. Pavlov took the bird to be the fruit of the boys' unrestrained fantasy. This thought always aroused a worry within him, as though in the invention there lay, ripening, a blight which could undermine the very foundation of the family's present happiness.

It had all begun, as most human adversity begins, with something totally insignificant, something that you take no notice of, and then later you think with anger, regret and pain: "Why was I so careless, why didn't I recognise the enemy at its first, dim appearance?" Pavlov could not forgive himself for having paid no attention in the beginning to the boys' talk about this large green bird which they claimed to have seen in the forest. But even if they had seen it, what of it? But one day he listened carefully to what they were saying.

"What do you think, is it bigger than a jackdaw?" asked the boy who was just six minutes younger than his brother.

"Of course it's bigger," the elder boy

answered confidently. "It's about the size of a crow, but a bit thinner."

"And its head is a bright, bright red, like it was on fire!" the younger boy cried passionately. "It's the most beautiful bird in the world."

"There's none more beautiful!" the elder agreed.

Pavlov smiled. There was no such bird that lived in the area. He knew all the feathered inhabitants of the countryside around Moscow: jackdaws, crows, magpies, sparrows, starlings, tomtits, siskins, goldfinches, nuthatches, woodpeckers, cuckoos—though you'd hardly ever see these. Then there were wood-pigeons, corncrakes, crossbills, jays, waxwings and various sorts of meadow birds. And in the winter there were bullfinches and redpolls. The boys must have been confusing things, or it was just the play of the light coming through the foliage of the trees.

"Did you see the dark blue on its breast?" asked the younger.

"There's not a bit of blue on it," the elder answered firmly. "It's all green, every feather of it, except its red head."

Pavlov decided then that they had dreamt up the bird, and he wondered why children could never be satisfied with reality. You would have thought that the world was so new for them, so full of unfathomed mysteries, and yet they were always in so much of a hurry to fill it with all sorts of fable and

fantasy. Not so long ago, when they first left the city, the boys had trembled with excitement and delight as they watched the humble, real, birds around the house and garden: they were visited by so many of the feathered inhabitants of forest and field. The boys could sit and watch for hours as a woodpecker hammered away so furiously at a pine that its pointed head seemed always just about to fall off. They were no less fascinated by the nuthatch which busily scurried about like a shuttle along the trunk and branches of an old fir tree.

Pavlov had fixed a plywood board to the branches of a hawthorn, and the boys would sprinkle seeds on this to feed the birds which came. They soon learnt to a nicety the tastes of the various birds: the tomtits, unlike the sparrows and nuthatches, were not fond of millet, but loved sunflower seeds; if they threw little pieces of meat onto the board, then the handsome, usually timid, jays would overcome their customary wariness. Pavlov was amazed at his sons' interest in the birds; and he himself liked to watch the small sparrows boldly driving the pink and puffed-up bullfinches from the food. The sparrows, as true pariahs, maintained a fiercely hostile relationship with the world around them. They knew they could expect no charity from people and, further, that the bird-tray had not been set up for them at all, so they took what they could in battle. A whole flock of them

would fly down to the board, they would push aside the smaller birds, drive away the bullfinches in short, sharp encounters, and peck up all the available food before anyone could stop them.

But why did the boys so soon exhaust the real world around them? Why did they try to populate their world with green, red-headed birds? Pavlov considered this question as seriously as he thought of everything which concerned the boys; but he found no answer. There were times when he was surprised and grieved that he understood his children so badly. For he had had the experience of his own childhood, he himself had been a little boy once upon a time! Although, it is true, he sometimes doubted this. His own childhood had not been a holiday, but rather a busy period of unending cares and continual bustle. Afterwards he had never been so weighed down and burdened, as he had been in the years of his childhood. His father had existed in his life only in a faded photograph showing a group of Red-Army soldiers, each wearing a pointed helmet with a large star on it. "That's him, the third one along on the second row," his mother would tell him, and then later he would tell it to others, but he was always surprised that, from the large group of young soldiers who were all alike to look at, he should take precisely that one, third along on the second row, as his father. And this third one along on the second row

had left him a hard legacy: a kind, but muddle-headed, widow with no profession other than that of mother; and a daughter, a small creature suffering from an illness of the stomach. And this widow of the third one along on the second row was given to Pavlov as his mother, the daughter of the same—as his sister; and both his mother and his sister required constant care. In the hours that were left free from his studying and the work with Young Pioneers, Pavlov would pinch empty bottles from the wine warehouse and sell them at the bottle-collection point at the other end of the city. This provided a small, but regular, income. Pavlov soon became a leader of Young Pioneers, and then a teacher in their summer camps. But his imagination always had a strictly practical function, and he never dreamt of himself as a conqueror of dragons or giants; he was more concerned with where he could earn a little more, borrow some money, how to get hold of some firewood or kerosene, and generally make ends meet. The young Pavlov would think of these things as he fell asleep, and his dreams were businesslike and practical, and therefore gave him little real rest.

And when Pavlov was back on his feet after the war, after his illness and the extremely difficult years at college, his youth had passed by, leaving behind it neither happy memories nor regrets. Pavlov began a new life as a grown man as though he had never had

a childhood, adolescence and youth. His new existence with his wife and sons was so precious to him that he did not let the ghosts of the past into it. But now he regretted that the link with his own childhood had been broken so sharply; otherwise, perhaps, he would have understood his sons better.

Pavlov had almost forgotten the conversation he had overheard, when the green bird once more gave notice of its spectral existence. This time the twins talked about it openly, in front of their parents, over lunch.

"I saw it again this morning," the elder announced. "It flew over my head and landed on a pine branch."

"On the fox-pine?" asked the younger.

"No, on the one that's burnt. And I could see it ever so clearly! I watched it for a whole hour."

"I bet you didn't watch it that long!"

"Well, maybe not a whole hour," the elder replied, his cheeks flushing. "But for ever such a long time. I got a good look at it. Its eye is like a new kopeck coin, all yellow and shining. And its beak is violet-coloured. It saw me as well, but it didn't fly away."

"Maybe it isn't afraid of people at all..."

"No," the elder sighed. "I thought maybe it was tame, and I went up to it slowly. It looked at me, watching, then it flapped its wings and disappeared."

"Did you get near it?"

"If it had been sitting a bit lower, I could've

reached out and touched it."

"That's enough chatter. Eat up!" their mother said unusually sharply. Pavlov realised that she, too, was not hearing about the bird for the first time, and that this persistent fabrication irritated her, just as it worried and grieved Pavlov himself.

The longer it went on, the worse things became: the boys became quite mad about the green bird. From morning to night they were obsessed with their fantasy, they were proud of it, as though they had really discovered a beautiful and previously unknown creature. In their talk there was no indication that they were trying to excite their parents' curiosity or attempting to draw them into some kind of game. They weren't worried whether they were overheard or not. They talked solely to each other, simply and seriously; and Pavlov was depressed to see the seriousness of this mutual game being played with all cards on the table. He seemed to see in it something dangerous and unhealthy.

Gradually the green bird came to dominate the whole of the twins' lives. They would hardly be back from school before they rushed off to the forest, and stayed there until late in the evening. The bird, as Pavlov was given to understand, was of particularly changeable habits: sometimes it would keep the twins waiting for hours, and would only appear fleetingly; at other times it would give them the benefit of its company for a whole

afternoon, flying unhurriedly from one branch to another. It would always appear from the direction of the open fields, and then fly around in an area between the burnt pine and the one near which the boys had once seen a fox, and which they therefore called the "fox-pine". These trees were at the edge of a clearing marked by a red-brown ant-hill and a rowan bush. The twins claimed that this was the favourite spot of the unusual green bird with the red head. It was a kind and trusting bird, and they sensed that it had an excellent temper: open, carefree and bold. It was afraid of nothing in the forest, neither the crows, the magpies nor the foxes. It was so attractive and alluring in its bright colours, yet it was not afraid to let the boys come within an arm's length of it. But for Pavlov it was a terrible bird: the fruit of an unhealthy imagination, a winged embodiment of his own innocent guilt before his sons.

A healthy and practical impulse, stemming, Pavlov believed, from his wife, inspired the boys to give their pastime the semblance of reality. They decided to feed the bird. Autumn, rainless and dry, was coming to an end. All the berries except the rowan were gone; the thin, dry and golden leaves were waiting only for a breath of wind before they fell from the trees. The morning frosts had burnt the earth, and all the tiny creatures had dug themselves into the bark of trees or the leaf-mould; nature was now short on edibles. The green

bird had not the strong beak of the woodpecker, to dig out its food from the tree-trunks; it was not omnivorous, like the sparrow, to be satisfied with what it might find along the road-sides; it was not a thief like the magpie, or a bird of prey like the owl, it had not the strength and insolence of the crows; unlike the more common birds of the area, it could not find food by unearthing a worm, or by pecking at a seed or shrivelled rowan-berry; nor was it a cadger like the tomtit, perpetually begging from the villagers. It was a proud bird and, obviously, a stranger to these parts. Realising all this, the boys began to feed it, sparing neither effort nor patience; and first of all they had to find out their bird's preferences. They took to the wood, in turn, buckwheat, millet, sunflower seeds, bread-crumbs, peas and oatmeal. They soon discovered that the green apparition loved sunflower seeds best of all. It was only unfortunate that magpies, sparrows and tomtits were also especially partial to these. The twins set up a watch to drive away the marauders. But this was not so simple! With shouts, whistles and wild leaps they tried to drive away the unwanted invaders, but the green bird, approaching on silent wings, took this row as being aimed at itself, and it gave the feeding area a wide berth.

The twins' usually measured, varied life was now completely shattered. They no longer had any time for reading, or chess, or for

messing about with the old radio set. School, homework and the green bird were all that was left of their life: among which, school and homework now belonged to the world of arduous duties, while the green bird was the occupation of their hearts. Pavlov was ready to be delighted by the twins gallantly serving their dream, were that dream attainable. But he saw all their selflessness being wasted on empty and barren fantasy.

"You might at least show the bird to your father," their mother one day said from the depths of her imperturbable calm. But Pavlov's sharpened sensitivity realised her worry.

"Of course, any time!" the elder twin replied simply.

At that moment Pavlov almost believed in the existence of this green bird with the bright red head. But as they were walking in single file along the forest path, and as they took up their observation post among the pines, he already knew for certain that nothing would come of it. And yet every magpie flying past, every guttural cry from the jay that was warning the forest of the approach of strangers, the fluttering of blue tits in the leafless bushes, the rustle of fallen leaves in the breeze, the dry, ringing sound as some thrushes flew to a belated rowan—all this made him start with impatience and hope.

They waited thus aimlessly for several hours. The twins were puzzled, grieved, but by no means embarrassed. Usually so honest

and sensitive, their annoying game had carried them away to forget themselves.

"Oh well, you've had your fun," Pavlov at last said, harshly. "You got me to believe in your bird. But that's enough now, the joke has turned into a lie, a pointless and silly lie."

"You're a fool!" the elder twin said, turning pale.

"You're a fool, dad!" the younger one repeated, and started crying.

Remembering the scene, Pavlov could still feel the pain, and this pain was deepened now because he was walking along the very path on which he had lost his sons' hearts. There was the clearing, the burnt pine, the ant-hill, the other pine and the rowan-tree. The hoar-frost was melting in the bright sunshine, and everything was damp and glistening, the pine needles, the trunks and the green, lifeless grass. On a branch, fluffing up its feathers, sat a waxwing, a round, grey-brown ball of fluff, with a crest on the top of its head.

Pavlov bought the milk in Kurynovo, and set off back home. But when he passed the high-voltage line and could see the pine forest, he felt it would be too much torment to return the way he had come; instead, he decided to go the roundabout route, through the birch copse. The damp bark of the birches seemed to be giving off the fresh smell of washing hanging out to dry; not a single leaf stirred in the still air, though the whole copse was covered in a thick carpet of yellow. Near

a rotting tree-stump there was something bright green showing through the leaves. Pavlov went up to it and with the toe of his boot disturbed a soft pile of feathers, feathers piercingly green and so light that at his mere touch several of them wafted into the air. And in this incredibly bright pile a number of the long, narrow feathers were touched with crimson spots of blood. A bird of prey had caught the green, red-headed bird, and had left behind not a bone, not an ounce of flesh; it had simply torn away the inedible costume and left it lying near the tree-stump, or maybe it had just dropped the feathers on the dry leaves and the wind had gathered them together by the tree-stump.

Pavlov's heart was filled with joy and sadness. Now for the first time he believed that the twins were ordinary, healthy boys, that they would easily overcome the fragility of their lungs, and that they would grow up as strong, reliable and kind-hearted people. But why had neither he nor his wife been able to rise to the simple belief in the miracle which had been revealed to their children? Why had their mother just stepped aside from it, and why had he, incapable of accepting their faith, tormented himself and insulted them?

In looking for the bird, the twins might wander as far as this part of the forest. Pavlov therefore found a sharp stick and began to dig a small grave. The ground was soft and damp on top, and hard underneath with the frost,

but he buried the feathers and covered them with a layer of decaying leaves. He took one red feather with him: he had already taught his sons the grossness of disbelief, and so now he needed material proof.

"I've seen your bird," he told them when he reached home. "It was flying south, but it dropped one of its feathers. Here."

The elder boy carefully took the feather, drew it gently across his cheek, and handed it to his brother who repeated the gesture.

"But will it get where it's going?" the younger boy asked thoughtfully.

"It was flying high and strong, it will certainly make it."

WANTED URGENTLY! GREY HUMAN HAIR

Gushchin stopped in amazement. There it was in black and white: written with relish in thick black ink on white whatman paper with a frosty gloss: "Wanted Urgently! Grey Human Hair". And alongside there were faded, yellow-stained notices about the Leningrad Film Studios—Lenfilm—needing cleaners, light technicians, drivers, hairdressers, electricians, workers, caretakers, canteen waitresses, special effects technicians and accountants.

"The bit about the human hair sounds rather ghastly!" thought Gushchin. "You need enviably unsullied peace of mind to write such a notice as that."

He heard a chortle and standing beside him saw a girl with a clean babyish face and a fashionable, stiff, puffed-up hairdo which was too grown-up for her.

"Don't worry," she said. "It's voluntary, you know."

After the clouded images of Auschwitz atrocities and semi-delirious visions of war, which had suddenly rushed over him, this babyish friendly face, laughter and voice seemed senseless to Gushchin and he could not understand what was being said to him.

"Your grey hair's not in danger," explained the girl, slightly embarrassed.

Gushchin's hair was the superb colour of steel which hair turns prematurely, and far from aging him, it made his dark-complexioned, sad face look younger than forty-five. What the girl had said and the bold manner in which she had said it, were intended as a compliment to Gushchin but he was used to abuse, and being constantly abused by his wife and so he now felt neither happy nor proud but if anything even sadder. He always felt like this when signals of kindness reached him from the outside world. It was easier to live with the knowledge that he was not even remotely interesting or attractive to anyone, but simply a complete and utter bore who totally deserved the lot of a hen-pecked husband.

"Well, at least it's a good thing they aren't looking for human teeth, nails and skin," Gushchin replied glumly, not bothering to be either civil or witty.

A pained expression ran across the girl's face, aging it instantly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was a bad joke. I'm a tactless fool."

"Goodness, no! I wasn't in a Nazi concentration camp."

He felt sorry for the girl. The poor thing had simply wanted to joke with a stranger, and now look how flat it had fallen!

"Don't think anything of it! Everything's fine," Gushchin said with a smile, "but what do they want this hair for?"

"Wigs," she said, returning his smile, reassured she had not offended him.

"Oh, I thought it was for mattresses."

"Mattresses?"

"Yes. Over washbasins in German hotels you find plastic receptacles where you're supposed to throw all the loose hair you comb out. These hairs are then used to stuff mattresses with."

"How nice! How clever!" The girl shrugged her shoulders. "And how disgusting!"

The topic of conversation was exhausted, and the two strangers who had accidentally met by the studio's notice board had nothing else to do but go their own ways. Now the young girl with her clean babyish face and fancy grown-up hairdo would go away, vanish, and her thin white jumper and thick short skirt just touching the knees of her lovely shapely legs would dissolve in the seething crowd in the avenue. And no matter how much longer Gushchin were to live, he would never again see her large, trusting, mirthful eyes, her mouth, which suffering aged instantly, nor hear her short laugh and

gentle voice. Appalled by the thought that he would soon be alone, Gushchin, weakling and underdog that he was, suddenly rushed into the attack.

"Are you in a hurry?.. Maybe we could stroll round the city a while? That is, if you've time, of course. I'm here on business, and I've only got to drop into the studios for literally five minutes... And then we could have a ride on a pleasure boat, sit in a cafe or go for a walk in the Summer Gardens..."

The girl gave him an inquisitive and sympathetic look. And Gushchin saw himself through her eyes: the heavy, unseasonally dark, off-the-peg Moscow suit, the small round collar which was too tight for him, the cheap tie which did not match his suit, the shoes with outdated thick rubber heels which had long been in need of a good clean and the ridiculously huge, scruffy sham leather briefcase.

"What a lot all at once! Goodness me: a walk, cafe, a pleasure boat trip. The Summer Gardens! Haven't you forgotten something? You know, we could go to the top of St. Isaac's, too, take a ride to the Alexander Nevsky Monastery and the Volkovo Cemetery, and then drop by the Hermitage, the Russian Museum and Pushkin's apartment."

She was just poking fun at him, at the pathetic cunning of a middle-aged, dull man in an off-the-peg Moscow suit and old-fashioned collar.

"I'm sorry," he said, resuming his usual role in a resigned and quite unoffended manner. "That was a sudden brainstorm. Nobody's struck up a conversation with me in the street for so long. It suddenly seemed to me that the world had become kinder in the most amazing way."

Just as before, the girl's face misted over, and seemed to grow older. Evidently, she possessed the rare gift of being able to penetrate beneath the outer layer of words.

"There's no need to apologise! I'm not against it. It's just that I've also got to go into the studios and I'll be about five minutes, too."

"Well, let's get going then!" said Gushchin enthusiastically: he was convinced she was going to "disappear" in the interminable corridors of Lenfilm. "Which department are you going to?"

"The actors'."

"Really?"

"Yes, I'm what is never in short supply at a studios—an actress. How about you? You've got me baffled. You look out of place in a studios."

"Why? Going by the notice board again, the studios don't only deal with people from the arts."

"No," replied the girl, shaking her head. "The cinema's like a wicked god who spots everything that comes into his field of vision. An accountant from a film studios is more

like a screen star than any other accountant from an ordinary office. But you don't work in the cinema, you're a serious, sad-looking person who's accidentally stumbled into this sham Wonderland."

"To put it more simply, I'm an engineer who specializes in catapults. I've been sent here at the request of the film crew of *Flight Into the Unknown.*

"I know," said the girl. "They're always using catapults. Are you from Moscow?"

"Yes. I've noticed Leningraders instantly recognise Muscovites."

"It's your countrybumpkin dialect that gives you away!" she replied with a laugh. "Well then, we already know as much about each other as you would learn from the application forms you fill in to visit somewhere abroad like, say, Bulgaria. Except we've left out the first question." She stretched out her hand. "I'm Natalia Viktorovna Proskurova. Natasha."

"I'm Sergei Ivanovich Gushchin."

They shook hands and went into the film studios' entrance hall.

"Do you need a pass?" she asked and then added proudly, "I've got a permanent one. So, let's meet back here or better still by the entrance in a quarter of an hour."

After nodding to the caretaker who obviously knew her by sight, she ran down the corridor into the heart of the building. Gushchin stared after her. He realised he would

never see her again but did not feel the same pain as before. She had not vanished anonymously or dissolved like a waking dream: she had given him her name as a gift and thereby, as it were, given him a right over herself, the right to remember her, miss her and hope. He could know and inwardly call her, speak with her, and his loneliness would be repleted. Fate had given him an unexpected and undeserved present, and he had to thank charitable fate and think of nothing else.

Gushchin waited for a long time while the war-invalid security man wrote him out a pass with his crippled hand but even mentally he did not hurry him. Time now meant nothing to him for the momentary experience had passed and become part of eternity. The complex exchange now taking place between Gushchin and the world about him did not submit to the laws of time: Natasha's presence was at work in the security's man crippled hand, and in the damp eyelashes of the elderly actress who had been refused a pass, in the thin pimply profile of the long-haired youth who said to his friend in a self-confident high-pitched voice: "The film's going to be a hit, man!", in the tremulous plaits of two school-girls who had been lured to the sacrificial altar of Art—and in everything small, insignificant, paltry and pleasant around him.

It was also like this afterwards, when, pass in hand, he finally entered the studios' corri-

dor, dizzily infatuated with Natasha. He wondered whom the studios were so avidly guarded from and felt sorry for the silly little people who had to go through all the palaver with passes—they found their redemption in Natasha. And so did the director of the science fiction thriller *Flight Into the Unknown*, and the red-nosed engineer in charge of safety provisions with whom he had last time discussed the problems of catapulting, and the producer's stuck-up secretary who had stamped his pass and travel papers, and the unrecognised stars of the future milling in the corridors—they were all innocent in the eyes of the world, and had all been illuminated by the intercession of Natasha, and her redeeming grace.

When he at last went down into the hall and through the entrance doors' dingy panes caught sight of the summer street outside, which did not belong to the studios, he suddenly baulked. He felt he didn't have the strength to push them open. He loved these studios where Natasha's strange, mysterious life was acted out, albeit not her whole life but just a small and unimportant part of it, but while the doors had not slammed behind him, a frail thread still bound him to her. Suddenly he had an idea: what if he were to go and give the wig department grey human hair—his own? Then he would have the right to stay in the studios a while longer, and who knows, perhaps Natasha would act the part of

a *grande dame* in a wig made from his hair? But even if she didn't, he would still have some close personal ties with her world. And then, Gushchin chuckled ironically under his breath, what if the studios really did need human nails, skin, bones and inwards, and he were to give himself up like refuse—which is just what he was in actual fact—for his beloved's sake.

"Goodness alone knows what you call this!" he heard someone say in a breathless, frustrated and angry tone. "You ... you're just an old rogue!"

Natasha was standing in front of him, her dark eyes wide open, full of indignation and on the brink of tears, and the lower part of her face—her lips with sagging corners and puckered chin—looked like an old woman's.

"I didn't believe you'd come," Gushchin muttered.

"How peculiar you are," she said, vexed but no longer angry. "You must have been let down a lot?"

Gushchin shrugged his shoulders. Yes, I have been let down a lot, and I've lost faith in myself and in the people around me. I acknowledge everyone's right to deceive me. In fact, this is just as immoral as being deceived. But I can't explain to you, Natasha, how it all happened because I don't understand exactly how I sank so low either. Obviously, it was all to do with things gradually changing: you learn to reconcile

yourself to dealing with something despicable day in day out over many years—just like a human organism gets used to poisons. And now you're capable of swallowing arsenic or something even worse with impunity. If someone at the front had dared tell me that I would be meekly living the way I do now, I would have knocked off the cheeky person there and then ... or myself.

They walked down Kirovsky Avenue towards the Neva River. The wind blowing off the sea cooled and refreshened the hot air; it was shady in the street and ablaze with sunlight in the square in front of the bridge. Natasha asked Gushchin why he had chosen to specialise in catapults. She realised that all professions had their good points but could not understand how someone could choose such an unusual speciality. In his young days everyone dreams of bringing happiness to mankind; evidently, he had also decided to make his dear ones happy by working with catapults? Of course, replied Gushchin, you see, catapults were also to do with space flights, and who in the twentieth century did not dream of space? Gushchin spoke casually because he realised she had asked him merely to fill the silence which had descended upon them as soon as they left the studios. He was not ready for this new meeting with her. She had gained a place in his memory, dreams, sorrow but here alive beside him, she was so intimidatingly youthful and lovely, she overwhelmed him.

I am tired. Constant self-constraint has left its mark on me. My soul is weary. I force it all the time to keep an unnatural routine. My wife is right in her own way when she says: "Why do you torment yourself? Nearly everyone lives like this." She never was short on names. And I didn't think our acquaintances' lives were so muddled. But no matter, they still get by. But somehow I just can't. I needed to belong to the minority who did *not* live like this. I have not gained the freedom that comes with indifference. I cannot get disused to looking upon my wife as the girl next-door with the madly-in-love face. She loved me then with much more passion and abandon than I did her. Whereas I was stunned by the war, the emptiness of the apartment which had fallen still during the war, by sudden loneliness, and the blankness of the future, she was head over heels in love, loving me with all the might of a woman who was still half a child. It was I who slowly learned to love her. But no sooner had I learned than I was done for. Then, when she started disappearing from home and coming back later and later, I made myself stop noticing her soft smeared lips, smudged, bleary eyes, untidy clothes, the stench of wine or brandy and cigarette smoke entangled in her hair. I used to ask her where she had been, giving her a chance to make excuses, to at least lie convincingly, and keep up a front of dignity in our life which was already becoming de-

spicable. I thought by doing so I was keeping her from some sort of final fall, I hoped to win her round with patience, restraint, and faith in her non-existent integrity. She was the first not to withstand this additional lie. Once I opened the door for her at about five in the morning. It was winter and icy cold air blasted in from the landing and struck my bare legs under my dressing-gown, inwardly chilling me forever. "Well, where have I been?" she announced hoarsely, almost threateningly and gave me a look full of hatred for the first time. Obviously, I had already bored her to death by acting the part of an ignorant and trusting fool. I said nothing, and stopped asking questions and no longer saw hatred in her eyes but simply condescending scorn, and sometimes even something verging on sympathy and understanding...

She used to come to him at night only now and then and always inebriated. He realised that it was not love urging her towards him but some kind of unappeasable female defeatism, and, ashamed, and cursing himself for being weak, he used to derive meagre pleasure from a woman whom he had once loved wholeheartedly, but was now almost afraid of. A person is never totally unhappy, he always has a glimmer of hope. The worst time came when their daughter grew older. He had put up with his life on account of her. She loved him with the kind of jealous adoration

with which girls often come to love their youthful, attractive fathers who are unpampered at home. But then the little girl grew up and learned the truth behind the shameful family secrets and with youthful ruthfulness resolutely took her mother's side, raising between herself and her father a blank wall of haughty scorn. His wife had acted cruelly with him but she was not a spiteful person. When he made timid attempts to mount the wall, his daughter's eyes grew smaller and filled with hatred. It seemed as though she could not forgive her father for being so meek, feeble and resigned. She did not love her mother but took her as an example, thus winning for herself independence, freedom from control, and the right to make demands without making any effort...

"No," said Gushchin. "You're wrong, it's not by Delamotte, it's by Quarenghi."

They had crossed the bridge and were now standing on the edge of the Field of Mars, near the statue of Suvorov, and Natasha, adopting her role as guide, had erroneously ascribed the tall, dull green and fairly ordinary house built by young Quarenghi to Vallain-Delamotte.

Natasha argued with the heightened self-esteem of a Leningrader who had been picked up for not knowing her city.

"Why argue?" said Gushchin. "There's a memorial plaque on the side of the house overlooking the square. There it clearly states

that the house was built by Quarenghi. Would you like to see for yourself?"

However, getting nearer to the house from their corner turned out to be not that simple—there was no pedestrian crossing straight across the street and so they had to make quite a considerable loop. Natasha took advantage of this and went on angrily insisting it was built by Delamotte.

"If you like, I'll name all Quarenghi's and Delamotte's famous buildings for you—the ones that are still standing and the ones that have been burned down, demolished, destroyed in the course of time or rebuilt beyond recognition." And Gushchin instantly fired off several dozen names and even the addresses of building which both still existed and had already disappeared.

"There's no need to cross the road," said Natasha, astonished. "I'm completely stunned. Does your knowledge extend to other architects or do you specialise strictly in Quarenghi and Delamotte?"

"In all the people who built St. Petersburg," replied Gushchin not without pride, "whether it be Kvasov or Ruska, Rastrelli or Rossi, Felten or Sokolov, but Quarenghi's my favourite architect."

"Why? Is he really better than Voronikhin or Rossi?"

"I'm not saying he's better. Simply that I like him better."

"So who are you then? A catapult spe-

cialist, an architect, art historian or the author of a Leningrad guidebook?"

"A catapult specialist," Gushchin replied with a grin. "You can check that out at the studios."

"But what's Quarenghi and Co. got to do with that, then? After all, you don't even live in Leningrad!"

"A person sometimes needs a haven where he'll be left in peace. People have even invented a nasty-sounding word to denote this salutory flight of the soul: a hobby. So then, old St. Petersburg is my hobby. Ugh, I hate that word!"

Yes, what a joy it is to open a small volume bound in red morocco leather and look at clear, stark photographs on thick silky paper with a noble gleam: an entablature that had remained intact from Elizabeth I's time in some unremarkable mansion on Kamenny Island; a portico by Quarenghi of exquisite simplicity and nobility which had survived in the heart of a by no means attractive factory yard in Liteinaya Street; the superbly unspoiled railings of a town estate, rebuilt beyond recognition, on Fontanka Embankment. What a joy to examine all this and search one's memory for the little corner of the city which harboured this particular vestige, and recall the landscape of the spot—the stonework around and the trees, and imagine what it all must have looked like long ago. You cease to notice that you are all alone

in the apartment again, and no longer remember why, and you feel in a pensive, lighthearted mood, for the masonry of old buildings is much softer and warmer than the stony hearts of egocentrics. However, you derive the greatest joy, and not even joy but lofty and solemn peace from Giacomo Quarenghi, a deformed, fat dwarf with a pudgy nose who created such supreme harmony. Other architects may be more powerful, lavish and richer in fantasy and inspiration but the chaste simplicity and artistic subtlety with which Quarenghi endowed all his creations gave them unparalleled nobility and perfection. Quarenghi thought in three dimensions rather than merely embellishing flat surfaces. The shadows and light on the astonishingly simple facade of the former Academy of Sciences fill one with a strange feeling of pride. You begin to believe that man cannot be abased as long as he remains aware of being privy to a world spirit: you are united with Quarenghi and sad Argunov, with solemn Chevakinsky and omnipotent Rossi against all the hardships of life, great and small, and against the night, constantly plunging you into solitude, against emptiness and sorrow.

"Would you like me to show you a quite unique Leningrad?" he asked Natasha hopefully. "I'm sure you don't know this side of Leningrad!"

"Where is it then, your Leningrad?"

"In side-streets, small court-yards, at the

back of famous buildings, sometimes right in the middle of Nevsky Prospekt, only people don't notice it, just as they often don't notice things right under their noses."

"My dear Sergei, why, this is going to take us longer than a day!"

The green light of an unoccupied taxi which had stopped sharply in front of the traffic lights near them made up Gushchin's mind. He seized hold of Natasha's hand and pushed her into the car. The driver was about to start muttering that he wasn't allowed to pick up passengers here but Gushchin said in such a confident and joyful tone: "Straight on, chum, don't dither now!" that he stopped complaining at once and sent the car shooting forward with a screech. No sooner had the car moved off than Gushchin recalled in horror that he had hardly any money on him. Of course, it would be enough for the taxi but how would he pay for the hotel?

He always carried little on him. To avoid unnecessary jibes, he used to give all his wages to his wife, down to the last kopeck. He did not smoke or drink, he shaved at home, and his only travelling expenses was a monthly pass. He spent only occasional extra earnings on books. And he used to set off on business trips with exactly the right amount in his pocket: two sixty for his daily expenses and one rouble fifty-six for his accomodation, and enough for the tram. But with the quick wit he had learned in his impoverished

student days when he managed to make his grant and the tips he earned as a railway station porter stretch far enough to cover a ticket to the Conservatoire or Moscow Arts Theatre, a small bouquet of flowers or a little present for his wife-to-be and other unplanned expenses, he worked out that by exchanging his sleeper on the Leningrad-Moscow Red Arrow Midnight Express for a seat in a slower passenger train, he'd just make ends meet. And so he put all thought of the nastily clicking meter out of his mind...

Every collector, even the most unsociable and retiring, at least once enjoys showing his treasures to someone else. But Gushchin was generous and sociable by nature, and it was circumstances that had made him retiring. Besides, what else could he share with Natasha? His hurt feelings, depression, sadness or ideas on constructing catapults? None of these could be divulged. He shared with her his only treasure which he had acquired little by little during long lonely evenings. And that was why Gushchin, usually an exceptionally considerate person, sent the taxi darting from one end of the city to the other and dragged Natasha across gullies, old cemeteries, cluttered court-yards, building sites and wastelands, without bothering in the least about her being interested or tired. It was as if he knew that there would never be another chance for such a tour as this, and he was so happy and enthusiastic that he wanted to

show her everything. He already realised Natasha knew only the famous architectural monuments and not the small vestiges of the bygone past which his collection consisted of, and Quarenghi's numerous buildings of secondary importance. He purposely chose routes along Khalturin Street, Nevsky Prospekt, Sadovaya Street and Fontanka Embankment and kept exclaiming in delight, "And this is a Quarenghi!.. An old chemist's!.. And here's another Quarenghi!.. And that old Ironmonger's over there... And this hospital's by Quarenghi!.. And recognise this? Yes, would you believe it, this is a Quarenghi, too!.."

His enthusiasm affected even the dozy, ruddy-faced driver with small ears angrily flattened against his shaved head. As soon as he caught sight of a house with columns, he immediately turned towards it without waiting for instructions.

"Where are you going? Keep straight on!"

"But what about this one... It's a Quarenghi," said the driver.

Natasha laughed. It seemed as though she was enjoying the tour just as much as Gushchin. The only surprising thing was that while Gushchin was praising some fresco or portico in the most impassioned manner, Natasha would be gazing in fascination not at the wonderful piece of architecture but at Gushchin.

"Look, look how superb this is!" Gushchin would exclaim.

"Yes, it is," Natasha would agree.

"It is, isn't it; and you haven't seen anything like it, have you?"

"No, I haven't," she would admit. "I didn't even know anything like this existed."

Gushchin came back down to earth when they were looking at the fragment of a sculpture depicting an angel in a small garden on Vasilyevsky Island. All that was left of the angel was its stone tunic and one wing, proud and beautiful, like a swan's in flight. Gushchin was fantasising about what the angel must have looked like in its original form when he suddenly spotted a large metal bird in the grass. The bird's flowing body was covered with iron chain-mail made of the most delicate, closely-knitted fish scales. A golden ripple ran up the chain-mail as the bird caught a ray of sunlight.

"What's that?" asked Gushchin, suddenly breaking off his commentary.

"Oh, really, Sergei, don't you know a starling when you see one!"

"But it's so huge!" said Gushchin, confused.

The starling certainly did look gigantic—the size of a pigeon at least! It seemed to be reminding Gushchin of the real world and of the extraordinary day he had been given which he was wastefully spending on something as beautiful but cold and lifeless as stone.

"Maybe that's enough of old things?" he asked.

"As you like, I'm not tired."

He paid for the taxi, and they sauntered slowly towards Lieutenant Shmidt Bridge.

"Do you live alone, Sergei?" Natasha asked sympathetically.

"Goodness, no! I've a family—a wife and a grown-up daughter nearly as old as you. Why did you think that?.."

"I felt you didn't have anyone else except..." she smiled faintly, "except Quarenghi."

"It's true," he replied glumly. "Though I don't understand how you guessed."

"Oh, it wasn't hard," she said quietly as though talking to herself.

"How about you?" he asked. "You're not single, of course? Do you have a husband and family?"

"No, I haven't anyone. My father was killed at the front, and my mother died during the blockade. I was brought up by my grandmother, and she's dead now too—she was very old. And I haven't had any offers of marriage. But I'm not lonely, Sergei. How about me showing you my Leningrad now?"

"Are you sure that's convenient?"

Natasha burst out laughing.

"I just knew you'd say something like that. Of course, it is."

Natasha's Leningrad was not far away, in Profsoyuzny Boulevard. They walked there in almost complete silence, both absorbed in their own thoughts. Coming towards them along the edge of the boulevard was a small donkey with a huge, smart saddle with red

velvet padding on its back which was used for giving rides to children.

"What a tiny little thing!" Gushchin suddenly said gently.

"Thank the starling for being so big and the donkey for being so tiny," said Natasha in a rather strange, moved and slightly devious tone.

"What do you mean?" Gushchin asked, bewildered.

"Thank life for all its wonders," Natasha replied in the same strange, tender tone...

They were now in an artist's studio. Nearly half the spacious room was taken up by an engraver's press and a large barrel of plaster. There were also two easels, a low wide sofa, about a dozen stools and a grand old armchair. Suspended from the ceiling were wire objects resembling bird cages—models of atomic structures, and some fantastic-looking plaster fruits were standing on shelves along the walls. These actually turned out to be human organs—kidneys, a liver, stomach, gut, lungs... The artist believed that Art had only celebrated the visible aspects of the human being, namely the face and body, and that the insides of man, the crown of creation, were no less beautiful and perfect: his powerful stomach, capable of digesting any food of vegetable or animal origin, his wonderful lungs, filling the blood with oxygen both on the tops of mountains and far below the earth's surface, and the human

heart which could endure so much, enabling a weak, naked and undefended creature to survive what the most powerful wild animal was incapable of surviving, and the divine genitalia, freeing man from dependence on the seasons in his procreation of the species.

The paintings, drawings and engravings indicated that the artist's restless spirit professed numerous faiths. The Suzdalian icon-painters, Italian Primitivists, French Impressionists, Spanish Surrealists, Russian Peredvizhniki Realists and rootless Abstractionists had gained possession of his soul in turn or possibly all at once. However, in all his different works he was just as exuberant, grandiose and talented. Hanging over the mantlepiece were a pair of plaster hands, widening out into a cone at the base. There were also the spade-like hands of pianists, the long tense-fingered hands of violinists, the strong hands of sculptors and the weak, undeveloped ones of poets, as well as hands of actors and scientists, inventors and craftsmen.

Among all these countless hands the cast of a small, narrow foot with taut ligaments on the instep belonging to a famous ballerina looked strange and touching.

While shaking hands with Gushchin, the artist immediately said he would like to make a cast of his hands.

"But I'm nobody special!" insisted Gushchin.

"Who knows! You've got a good, talented hand."

And before he knew it, Gushchin was sitting with his sleeve rolled up, and the huge, bearded, blue-eyed artist who looked like a fairytale giant, picked up dollops of plaster with his powerful hands and poured them onto Gushchin's hand with gentle ticklish movements.

While the plaster was drying, the artist, adorning his light brown hair with a crown of ox-eye daisies, clambered onto a barrel and started playing a pipe. Whereupon two little fair-haired boys appeared from another room and began weaving gracefully in time to the high-pitched, lilting sounds. Gushchin felt there was nothing pretentious about this: the boys were not trying to show off in front of their guest, indeed, they did not seem to have even noticed him. That was the way the family lived: the father sculpted, drew, painted, and made shoes and when he was resting, he would put a crown on his head and play a pipe so as to feel, if only for a short while, like a carefree forest dweller.

He put aside his pipe when it was time to remove the plaster from Gushchin's hand. No sooner had he done this with natural agility than Natasha and his wife, a thin woman with a plain face, came in carrying a round board with bottles and glasses on it. They balanced the board on two stools, and the artist with amazing speed filled the glasses

without spilling a drop.

"To art!"

They all knocked their glasses back, and the artist filled them again.

"To women!"

Gushchin gave Natasha an enquiring look: he couldn't keep up with such a pace.

"There's nothing you can do about it—it's a ritual," she said. "He'll be mortally offended."

"To love!" the artist raised his glass for the third time.

Gushchin drank the rather sweet sparkling wine and his head began buzzing pleasantly.

"What wonderful wine!" he said. "It's delicious."

"It's fermented Georgian wine—Khvanchkara," explained the artist calmly. "It doesn't travel."

Two young poets arrived with a bottle of Kuban vodka. One of them, a small-boned, rather puny nineteen-year-old youth with a golden fringe covering his eye-brows and a round childish face, was at once swamped with requests to recite his poetry. He did not need much persuasion and began reciting in a resonant, rich baritone, which in view of his puny outward appearance, came as a surprise. And the poetry sounded grand and vibrant, and in intonation slightly like Yesenin's *Pugachev* but by no means imitating it.

Then the handsome poet recited some of his. Although he was older and more mature-

looking than his companion, Gushchin felt that his poetry was not so good. In a measured, quiet but clear voice he recited a short poem about a solitary street-lamp and gave Natasha a wounded look.

"That's very nice," she said in an indifferent tone.

The poet blushed crimson and turned away.

All this time Gushchin had not exchanged a single word with Natasha. He talked with the artist, drank wine, listened to the poetry and Natasha chatted in an undertone with the artist's wife, played with the children, exchanged a few words here and there with the poets and also listened to the poetry. However, there was friendly intimacy underlying this outward lack of communication between the two of them. They behaved like people who shared something in common and had no need to converse out of courtesy. And the handsome poet must have sensed this for more than once Gushchin caught his smouldering glower.

The wine, the unusual setting and all the day's impressions piled on top of Gushchin and wore him out completely. He toasted several other things, raved about something or other, and replied to someone. but it all seemed like a dream. Now and then he came to his senses and heard the handsome poet, accompanied by a guitar, singing a sad song about the country of Hippopotamia, and saw

a shaggy-haired youth come bursting into the studio and rush straight over to the artist, shrieking, "So, is Vereshchagin a genius and luminary?" And then the artist ripped the collar of his shirt, like ancient warriors used to before battle, and bared his chest in support of Vereshchagin. And Gushchin also recalled a clear sober idea of his about people of his generation wrongly criticising the young generation. "They're better than us because they're more independent," he wanted to convey this idea to another guest—a sad Mephistopheles with a goatee beard but just then sleep plunged him into a black pit.

His sleep was short and refreshing. He kept his eyes shut as he thought of what to say as an excuse, and all of a sudden heard the handsome poet say quietly very close-by, "So, he picked you up in the street, did he?"

"No, actually it was me who picked him up," came the calm reply.

"I didn't know you were in a habit of doing such a thing."

"Neither did I."

"Anyway, it's still disgusting to dress like that!" said the poet with faint malice. "It isn't the '20s any more."

Gushchin had missed the moment to wake up and thus put an end to any further discussion of his person. What had just been said demanded a reply. But what was he to do—he couldn't fight a young boy and giving him a talking to would be even sillier. There was

only one thing to be done: he had to subject himself to eavesdropping some more, and pretend he was asleep.

"That's odd," said Natasha, "I did not even notice what he was dressed like."

Gushchin could not catch her intonation but he felt something alien about the way she pronounced the small word "he".

"You do usually."

"Well, when there's nothing else worth noticing."

"Why are you angry?" the poet asked bitterly.

"Me? I thought you were angry."

"Look, only tell me the truth. What on earth could you see in this ... well ... moth-eaten fellow?"

"I feel safe with him. I don't know what else to say. I feel defended."

"And defenseless with me?"

"Well, of course, you're a first-rate boxer and anyone who pestered me you could knock flat but that's not the sort of defended feeling I mean."

"Maybe he's a secret genius?"

"I think he's good at what he does, and knows his stuff."

"And is that all?"

"That's not to be sniffed at. You and I have known each other for about seven years and you're still a debutant poet, an amateur actor and first-rate boxer. So, get cracking as a poet or become a professional actor or if the worst

comes to the worst, a top-class sportsman."

"You've never been cruel before—what's got into you?.."

"I've never had to defend anyone before!" she interrupted him and Gushchin felt sorry for the poor handsome poet.

He certainly did not seriously consider himself a favoured rival. Natasha did not like the poet anyway, and he, Gushchin, had accidentally become the focus of attention of this restless young soul. His personal attributes had nothing to do with it. He, you see, had seen the real Natasha, and his heart had gone out to her. But Natasha had not seen the real him: she had made him up, going by her first impression. And that had possibly been his grey hair, namely what was urgently wanted at the film studios. But this did not make him feel bitter—their meeting was still a divine gift, as was the studio, the giant of an artist, his family and friends, and the poetry, songs and arguments—the very sound of young, passionately enthusiastic voices!

When Gushchin opened his eyes, the handsome poet was no longer in the studio, and sitting in his place was a young girl with the pale face of a mermaid and lovely fair hair. She gave Gushchin an enigmatic smile as though welcoming him back after a long absence. Natasha came up with a small cushion in a coarse linen cover.

"You're tired, Sergei, let me pop this under your head."

This wasn't playful banter but friendly concern for a tired elderly man.

"Thank you," said Gushchin confusedly and gratefully. "I'm no good at drinking. I'm not used to it any more."

"Nobody here is. Even though they're used to it."

Obviously, Natasha was referring to the young poet with the melancholy pinched face who had completely collapsed and the tipsy Mephistopheles, and Vereshchagin's opponent whose face was bright red as though he had just had a steam-bath. Only the giant of an artist, as indeed befitted a legendary warrior, was fresh and cheerful-looking, although he had drunk just as much as the others...

Natasha took Gushchin away from the hospitable household when the half-dead poet and Mephistopheles started getting ready for another sortie in search of vodka.

"Don't be angry, my dear," said the artist plaintively, "the lads want to drink a little."

"Drink by all means but Sergei's had enough!" she replied in a resolute tone.

The parting was touching. The artist hugged Gushchin, kissed him and whispered through grit teeth:

"If you're here again—come straight to us and don't you dare go to a hotel! If you hurt Natasha..." He did not finish what he was saying but the uncontrolled tears which bleared his blue eyes stood for the words "I'll kill you!"

Gushchin felt this was no mere threat either, and he once again kissed the artist on his firm red lips which were buried in his tangled, velvety beard.

Veta, the artist's wife, insisted on giving Natasha a pie, some pancakes which had gone cold and some other left-overs, and the little boys started howling bitterly and tugging her skirt, and Gushchin realised she really wasn't all alone in her large city...

Natasha lived in Rakov Street. They chose a roundabout way there via Palace Square and the Field of Mars. Here Leningrad was generously floodlit which made the palaces and obelisks stand out of the darkness in an attractive manner but this glossy finish for the tourists caused the city to lose its austerity and proud independence. Even so, if one made a special effort, in the light blue haze over the flood lights and in the sharp white glare of the illuminated walls one could still glimpse Petrograd of 1917 when the soldiers of the Revolution used to warm themselves by camp fires at night. "The smoke of the camp fire and chill of the bayonet..."

Gushchin shuddered as though he had just been touched by this sharp cold bayonet. Take note—your day is still going on, the cinders are still glowing in the fire. Remember, remember that you really did walk across Palace Square holding hands with a girl called Natasha, so don't try and convince yourself later on that it was all a dream. And remember:

she was with you all day and all evening, and put up with you, and didn't send you away although you were first overexcited, then depressed, then drunk and by the end completely went to pieces. She forgave you everything and went on being kind to you, and it all really happened, it did, and it still is happening, it's not over yet. She's beside you, all of her—her eyes, her tanned cheeks, her tender mouth which ages when she looks sad, her glamorous dishevelled hairdo, her neck, shoulders, Lord, all of her warm life, and she's walking beside you and you can touch her. And to his horror, he touched her arm, and she gave him an enquiring look.

"Sorry," he muttered, "it suddenly dawned on me that you were really here."

And showing no sign of surprise, Natasha replied in a comforting voice, "I'm here, of course, I'm here."

Full of enthusiasm, Gushchin began thanking her warmly for showing him "her Leningrad".

"What delightful talented people they all are!.."

"Yes..." she agreed absent-mindedly. "But somehow today I wasn't as fond of them as usual."

"Why?" he asked anxiously.

She kept silent.

"How shall I best put it... An actor requires truly consummate skill to act out not only a scene or monologue but especially a pause.

At one time the Moscow Arts Theatre was famous for its pauses. My friends don't know the meaning of a pause. They always have to fuss—arguing, exposing someone or other, reciting poetry, singing, drinking vodka, suffering about something, fighting or dashing about exhibitions, reviews, first nights..."

"But is that really all that bad?"

"You see, their fussiness comes from them being dilettantes. At everything in their inner lives. That's not true, of course, of the artist—he's a true master, a professional who not only carries the full weight of a family on his shoulders but also has the energy to play music and fool about. But I really shouldn't... I should be grateful for having them. Why invoke God's wrath! Thank You, thank You!" she repeated, lifting her face up. "I'm saying that to God so that He doesn't do them any harm... But you know what, Sergei, you know how to keep a pause going. It's marvellous keeping silent with you!"

Natasha lived in an old house near the centre. From its low gateway you could see one of the floodlit majestic wings of the Mikhailovsky Palace. It seemed to Gushchin that such was Natasha's sensitivity that as a farewell gift she had given him one of the best works of Rossi, and that she wanted to make their parting if not less sad, at least more bearable. If it had been some other girl, he would not have been offered the chance of seeing the Mikhailovsky Palace these last few

minutes, its shining columns and austere railings. He tried to put himself in an elevated and ironic frame of mind so as not to fall into despair.

He touched her shoulders with his palm and felt the tender warmth of her body through her thin jumper. Any moment now she would go away and the happiest and most unexpected day of his life would be over. Oh, slower, slower!.. What horror I shall feel when your steps have faded through the dark gateway. Then neither the Mikhailovsky Palace nor all the wonders of Rossi nor Quarenghi himself will save me!..

She took hold of his hand lying on her shoulder and in case he did not guess what she intended, rather sharply pulled him after her. The gateway's arch loomed over them. With overwhelming tenderness Gushchin gazed at the shadowy low archway through which Natasha used to go out and come back home; he gazed at the damp peeling walls and old cobblestones underfoot. Natasha did not want to say goodbye to him in the street, with passersby looking on, and instead she was drawing him even closer to her life and her home. And there it was, her home, in the heart of the small circular yard which smelt of damp birch firewood. The yard was deep, well-like, and there was a full moon overhead which was lighting up the log-pile, the rounded cobblestones and the bronze handles of the old doors.

Gushchin stopped at the foot of the worn stone steps. And again Natasha's hand pulled him after her. The massive weary door sang its sad little song and in the wan light of the small dusty light bulbs the staircase loomed ahead, sweeping up into boundless black heights. As in all the old lodging houses, the steps were chipped and worn, and the loose banisters had been stained and rubbed by innumerable palms until they shone but it seemed to Gushchin that this staircase went up to the sky and he went after Natasha, losing his breath not because of the steepness of the steps but through excitement and gratitude. Natasha was doing him the most tremendous kindness by taking him into her house and giving him the joy of being close to her for the last time before vanishing forever.

They passed by small copper name plates engraved with old-fashioned writing and unbelievably long lists of residents, and post boxes covered with cuttings of newspaper names; suddenly Natasha stopped by a door, and Gushchin, thinking the staircase would never end, nearly knocked her over. Natasha burst out laughing, unlocked the door and they both stepped into pitch darkness. The light switch clicked, landing Gushchin in a small hall with a neat coat rack, umbrella stand, and an oval wall mirror above a small table with clothes brushes lying on top. Gushchin was touched by these little details of a solitary existence. Never before had he seen

a hall so practically equipped with all the bare essentials.

Natasha took his briefcase out of his hand and put it on the table. The shoddy sham leather thing looked excruciatingly out of place in this smart and clean hallway. Gushchin entered Natasha's room as he would a sanctuary and he was in such a blissfully suppliant trance that he did not make out the separate objects or even think of their purpose. The mist enclosing his consciousness was penetrated only by the scent of flowers, of which there were a great many everywhere as there were photographs of pale anxious-looking unfamiliar people, drawings and engravings.

His sorrow grew unbearably agonising on account of the brevity and fragility of this undeserved gift, and he longed to leave as soon as possible so as not to prolong his agony in vain. He would go away and leave for Moscow, and return to his usual way of life, and when his sorrow had eased, he would be able to recall with tenderness and joy the small neat apartment, the focal point of Natasha's life.

Natasha came up and suddenly put her arm firmly round Gushchin's neck, drew him towards her and kissed him. This proved too much for him to bear and he began crying—not outwardly—his eyes remained dry, but inwardly, in his heart. And hearing the hollow soundless cry inside him, Natasha pressed her

palms against his temples.

"Don't, love, don't. I feel so peaceful and happy with you but you still don't believe me. Kiss me yourself, please do."

Gushchin reached for her hand and kissed it. And then Natasha kissed his hand and said in an extraordinarily simple manner:

"Take your clothes off and lie down. I'll be back in a moment."

Happiness? No. Oblivion. Nothingness. Dream-like death. And when he came to his senses, Natasha was lying on his arm with her eyes closed, and he could not hear her breathing. Suddenly alarmed, he put his ear to her chest and heard her heart beating hard and regularly, only very quietly.

The moon was virtually slipping through the window, pouring light into the room, and making everything in it as clear as day. From a large photograph hanging on the wall by the sofa a young man of about twenty-five was gazing firmly and serenely straight into Gushchin's face. Gushchin turned away but the same firm large eyes were staring at him from the dressing table. He turned and looked at the opposite wall but there, too, hung photographs of the same young man at younger and older ages, and in one as a young boy with large eyes, a high forehead and soft pouting lips. And it was this photograph that really got Gushchin. Natasha was, of course, bound to have had romances and affairs but just how fond of a person must you be in order to hang

a whole room with his photographs and commit yourself to his constant presence. After all, if the feeling were to pass, it would be so tedious for your gaze to be constantly falling upon the features of someone you no longer loved. So then, did Natasha still love this young man with resolute light eyes? Then what had happened between them was a theft. True love had been robbed. Should he leave? But what would Natasha think? She would be totally convinced she was dealing with an old wolf. Should he leave her a note? But could you really say everything you needed to in a note? He got up and without knowing what he was doing himself, stretched his hand out towards the large photograph hanging opposite.

"Don't touch!" exclaimed Natasha in an unfamiliar, cold tone. "Don't you dare touch my father's picture!"

Father?.. This young boy was Natasha's father? But then what was so astonishing about that? After all, Natasha's father might well have been younger when he was killed at the front than his daughter was now.

"Oh, Lord!" said Gushchin. "And I was suffering so! Forgive me, Natasha, I do believe I actually was going to remove it."

The tension lifted from Natasha's face. She stretched towards Gushchin and gave him the same powerful hug once again. In an upsurge of joy and profound pity for Natasha and her boy-father who had never found out what he

had left behind on the earth, Gushchin suddenly broke free of everything that had been restraining, binding and humiliating him.

When they disengaged themselves from each other's arms, Natasha said in a happy, tired voice:

"I loved you at once... As soon as I caught sight of you... You're wonderful, marvellous, you're—Quarenghi!.."

Gushchin left late that evening. Natasha was filming, so he spent the whole day drifting about the city in a blissful daze, without noticing his surroundings or favourite buildings for even Quarenghi's harmony could add nothing to his overwhelming joy. And this joy prevented him from feeling pain when they parted on the platform—miraculously, Natasha had found time to see him off. Only later he realised she must have been keeping a lookout at the station for a long time for the slower train he had exchanged his ticket on the express for. It was only when the platform started running backwards and Natasha forwards with a strangely aloof and emotionless expression on her face that for a moment Gushchin divined the pain another person was experiencing but then the train accelerated, Natasha disappeared and he felt joyful again.

At a loss as to how to manifest his exuberant joy, he started helping the passengers to put their suitcases and other possessions on the luggage rack. He offered help so

eagerly that an elderly lady who had obviously known better days said, fumbling embarrassedly in her bag:

"How much do I owe you, dearie?"

Gushchin roared with laughter and stuck his shoulder under a basket which was tumbling out of the weak arms of a young pregnant woman.

And then he climbed onto the upper bunk, put his head on his briefcase, which was soft and formless and made a superb pillow, and was instantly carried back to the room in Rakov Street, flooded with bright moonlight, and confidently met the firm direct stare of the young man who had been killed at the war.

He woke up in Malaya Vishera, awakened by the long and drawn-out silence of the stop. The station lights gleamed dimly outside, the platform ran along the other side and from his side he could see the damp rails glinting and railwaymen wandering along, drearily tapping the train's wheels, and a solitary freight carriage moving along by itself, and a man with a knapsack who was urinating cheerlessly by a water pump, and all this hopelessly alien life, which was totally indifferent to his inner world, caused Gushchin to feel horribly depressed. He tossed and turned on his bunk and was about to jump down when the train jolted and plunged him headlong into a bottomless pit-like sleep, and once again he found himself in Natasha's room...

Gushchin disliked Kalanchovskaya Square. Its stations betokened distant journeys in three directions—to the north, east and south—to the furthest points in the country. And people got on trains there and travelled to the Pacific Ocean and the White Sea, the shores of the Georgian rivers Aragvi and Kura, but he, Gushchin, never went anywhere. He was frustrated by this invitation to travel far and wide which he let go not so much through lack of time and money—if he wanted to he could find both—as through lethargy and an inability to break with old habits and cast off the fetters of marital life. He felt guilty whenever he was near the stations—a Moscow ant which dared not crawl out of a magic circle outlined by routine. That day, however, he came out into the square without shame or guilt. He had not been all that far, it would seem, but it was perhaps the furthest journey of his life. And, gripping his light luggage more firmly, he strode briskly into the crowd of other passengers.

He lived nearby, at Krasniye Vorota, and so he did not bother to go the one stop on the Metro. As he walked under the railway bridge, he caught sight of the huge advertisement stand of the Museum of Fine Arts, stretching the entire length of a six-storey building and the outline of the horse statue of the soldier of fortune, Colleoni.

He was very fond of this sculpture by Verrocchio. Colleoni was looking at the world

or, to be more precise, over the top of the world across his armoured left shoulder, and his furrowed face was full of invincible will power. And the powerful steed of the soldier of fortune matched its rider: it looked as though it was stamping across the bodies of the slain. In this sculpture Gushchin saw the unconscious exposure of a mediaeval soul in which Time had still to arouse doubts and compassion. As usual, he gazed with pleasure at the fierce horseman's weather-beaten pale green outline and suddenly realised it was all over—his Leningrad experience had come to an end. The Museum of Fine Arts was just as much part and parcel of Moscow as the Hermitage was of Leningrad. He had been able to deceive himself in Kalanchovskaya Square because it still wasn't Moscow but rather a continuation of endlessly long Nevsky Prospekt but here he was already well and truly captured by Moscow, and there was no more escaping; not only was his home nearby but so was something alien and awesome for some reason called a family. He stopped and pressed his hand against his chest as though the monstrous horse had brought its thundering hoof down on his heart. He stood there with his eyes tightly shut, hardly breathing, and the fearsome horseman, after showering him with misfortune like mud, rode away...

Life was strange now for Gushchin, even stranger than before. Outwardly everything went on the same as ever: he went to work,

and leafed through books about old St. Petersburg all by himself in the evenings but everything he did seemed pointless. He would gaze indifferently at the beautiful photographs of magnificent buildings but they were no longer a source of satisfaction. Relentlessly, mercilessly Natasha's face would arise from the yellowing pages. It would appear through the sheets of paper and tracing paper, swirling before Gushchin's eyes in the smoky blue haze of meetings, and stalking down streets and into the Metro after him. She was merciless, this girl, like Colleoni, and she loomed before him in both dreams and his waking-hours, through street crowds and business talks, and there was no escaping her.

In Leningrad he had vowed to himself that he would buy a light-weight suit, and a good shirt and tie, but Natasha ordered him to stay in his old clothes, which she had touched with her hands and looked at with her eyes. For the same reason he kept his awful briefcase, which had been their loyal companion throughout. They were having a heat wave, and he used to swelter in his heavy suit and shirt with its tunic collar, which had become unbearably tight from being washed daily.

Natasha gave him no respite. Everything around lost its significance for him, and became a reflection of Natasha, and everything he saw and felt through her, and it totally exhausted him. He used to plead with her: "Leave me. You're not here, so just vanish,

will you!" But this did not help.

One evening on his way home from work he stopped by the Chistiye Ponds to watch the children tossing millet and sunflower seeds to the birds. Among the sparrows—Moscow old-timers—Gushchin occasionally spotted beautiful unfamiliar birds with pointed tails, chocolate-brown backs and off-white breasts. But then a large bird lithely swooped down onto the grass, tarnishing its grey feathers in the sunset, and scared all the little birds away. The bird, not pink but tinged with pink, had a patch of azure-blue sky on each of its wings. It looked this way and that with its gold-flecked round eyes and began sharply and powerfully pecking at the grain, a beautiful, wild and unnatural guest in this concrete jungle. "A jay! A jay!" the children exclaimed in excitement. But Gushchin let himself be deceived and saw only the gold around the birds' pupils, a fusion of tenderness and strength. "Natasha!" he whispered to the bird. "Why have you flown here? It's dangerous for you here, Natasha!.."

However, he gave nothing away to his wife and so was surprised when she asked him one day in a cheerful banter:

"Right, own up, you've been up to something, haven't you?"

"Yes, that's just like me, isn't it?.."

"Look, you can't pull the wool over my eyes, you know," she said gravely and with sudden keen insight. "You're in love!"

It was most likely only because these words sounded like an insult coming from his wife that he did not affirm her suspicions.

From then on he kept catching her inquisitive, searching gaze. "It would be the last straw if she started feeling jealous," he thought wearily. "It looks as though I'm fated to pass through all the circles of hell in my family life." But she was not jealous, she merely kept a sharp eye on him, and in her watery eyes, once the colour of emerald and now that of bottle glass, there was no trace of malice, merely benign curiosity. It was as though she were trying to find something in Gushchin, and jog his memory about something, but instead all she did was make him feel uneasy. He found her intrusive stare unsettling for it seemed to him that she was penetrating into his last refuge—his thoughts. And to crown it all, she suddenly stopped going out in the evenings.

He found it all too hard to bear any longer. And when Natasha became entrenched in all the people, animals, birds and objects around him, and whenever he touched something animate or inanimate, he felt he was touching her hot tender flesh, it was with a feeling of desperation and not deplorable resolution that he sent her a telegram saying: "Is grey human hair still needed?" The reply came with surprising swiftness: "Yes, yes, yes, urgently!" Gushchin realised from the way the word "yes" was repeated three times, that

she was missing him too. He was astonished he could also cause someone pain. Not once during all these agonising days had it dawned on him that Natasha might also be miserable, since he felt that she was born to regard her own existence as a source of boundless joy, for, after all, it was so wonderful and joyful to her!

But now, as soon as he had found out the truth, he felt strong.

How simple everything becomes once you have come to a decision! At work things immediately went the way he wanted, just as though it had been known there for a long time that he was going to change his life sharply. And his wife did not put any obstacles in his way either, gratefully accepting all his conditions. All she said in a rather absurdly triumphant manner was:

"You see, I guessed the way the wind was blowing at once! How important it is for a person to be right just for once!"

And then she began fussing about and getting Gushchin's things ready as though she was packing him off to a war: washing and ironing his white shirts, darning and mending this and that. Gushchin disliked looking at her stooping back as she did these futile and unwanted chores.

His daughter accepted his departure with even greater composure.

"Your father's leaving us," her mother told her.

"And about time too," she replied in a calm, benevolent manner.

Gushchin had read somewhere that Karl Briullov, leaving Nicholas I's Russia for ever, took all his clothes off at the border and stepped into his new life naked, refusing to carry with him even the dust or smell of the country which had ceased to be his motherland. Gushchin felt something similar. He left his old but still strong suit at a second-hand shop and bought himself a pair of summer trousers, a woollen shirt and some sandals.

"How young you are still!" his wife said in amazement.

He left home with nothing but what he had in his pockets—his documents, air ticket, comb and razor. Once and for all he took leave of the whole of his past life: the people who had not wished to become close to him, the cold, eternally deserted apartment full of indifferent things, the wretched clothes he used to put on, and even the few dearly loved books and his faithful companion—his worn-out, ragged briefcase.

Just after daybreak he stepped out into the early morning street, which was still damp from being watered, and was astounded by its empty vibrance, warm freshness and serene readiness to lead him to happiness. He felt like a runner starting the final home stretch, still raring to go. Now nothing stood between him and victory. His clothes, so well-fitting he could hardly feel them, enhanced this feeling

of lightness. Yes, his wife was right: he had kept his youth by not wearing himself out with all the life's enticing things: he had been kept on ice and thawed out now, he was fresh and pert.

Lord, in just a couple of hours he would be with Natasha! And as a wedding gift he was going to receive the whole of Leningrad. He now thought of Leningrad with such tenderness as though it was especially for him that Natasha had had the city built and bridges thrown across the Neva and Fontanka, the Rostral columns erected, and every park surrounded by a fence and archways inserted in the spots where houses barred the streets' access to squares. With painstaking, expansive, loving care she had created this incomparable city which from now on and forever more would be the city of their love. Yes, how divinely generous life was to have bestowed his beloved upon him in such a setting!

At the corner he turned round towards the house where so many of his days and nights were buried. His wife was leaning far out the window and watching him go. Suddenly, at an odd and unnatural close range he caught sight of her puffy face with its wide-open pores, lustreless watery green eyes in wrinkled sockets, the unwanted, defenceless face of a prematurely old woman. She was staring at him with absent-minded, eager curiosity, without malice or jealousy as though at something unattainable, and although she was

higher up, it looked as though she was lower down, and her expression was that of a fallen horseman, a bird struck down by a shot. He was about to wave goodbye to her when suddenly a strange gutteral sound issued from his throat and he turned back.

SOMEWHERE NEAR THE CONSERVATOIRE

The first time Petrov had gone there in a landrover. Army vehicles were allowed to drive through but not about Moscow. Petrov had always kept to the rule, using the landrover only for fishing and shooting trips or travelling around the country, and at other times relying on public transport.

The traffic patrolmen had an amazing knack of guessing whether you were bound for some distant out-of-town destination or blatantly making use of your old "Billy-goat" to tootle around the town. If you were doing the latter, a black-and-white striped baton would firmly bar your path, and Petrov, who hated being lectured or reprimanded, hardly ever broke the rule. Then why on earth had he driven "Billy" into that forgotten backlane behind the Conservatoire? He was asking himself this question when, after going up and down the two Kislovsky Lanes and neigh-

bouring by-streets, he was stopped as he drove out into Herzen Street. And although he hastened to assure the elderly traffic man that he knew the rule quite well but had been let down by an angler friend, who had failed to turn up at the agreed spot, he had to show his driving licence and vehicle certificate, and to listen to a long lecture, as if he were not a Doctor of Sciences but some little boy who had been making a nuisance of himself.

So just what had he been about when he went to his icy sheet-iron garage and, after a laborious process of stoking up, started his long unused and frozen "Billy" and drove off in search of a forgotten house in a forgotten by-street? Simple psycho-analysis explained the whole thing. He had wanted to get himself into an annoyingly unpleasant situation and thus cure himself of any further desire for excursions into the past. Not knowing the address, he would with his habitual thoroughness, if he had been on foot, have started questioning passers-by and getting upset by their cold, uncomprehending or even irritated expressions. He would have got angry with himself for his habit of pursuing matters to the bitter end and even more angry at being foiled in the attempt, and he would have turned a minor failure into mental agony. He would have made himself really unhappy, hopelessly and suffocatingly unhappy, in a way that he had never been before, until old age overtook him.

Going by car was different. It amounted to nothing more than circling round an unidentified target.

He had acknowledged himself an old man when he reached fifty, not because he had suddenly felt the weight of years—actually he felt better physically than five or six years ago—but because he believed in magical signs, in the seven-year cycle of human development, in anniversaries and round figures. When he was in his late forties, he had gone about like a fighting-cock, full of victorious energy, but at fifty he had submissively let his muscles sag and unhooked that nameless grappling iron that holds the personality together. In the privacy of his own thoughts he told himself that he had stopped fighting, that he had retired from the game, although he had not been fighting anyone before or taking part in any game. He had lived quite happily and simply, enjoying his chosen profession and his habits.

Having gained a Doctor's degree in archeology at an early age, Petrov had realised that he was not cut out for research. It was a deadly bore digging up burial mounds in search of bits of broken crockery and other pitiful remnants of a life that had long since sunk into oblivion. All the things that had been so thrilling to read about in childhood and adolescence, and so enjoyable in the brief months of a student's fieldwork, turned out to be unbearably tiresome, exhausting and

no fun at all when they formed one's sole occupation in life. The archeologist's true standby, if fortune does not lavish upon him some astonishing stroke of luck, is a maniacal patience, patience of a kind that Petrov had never possessed. So he began to write about those who did possess the quality he himself lacked, and also about the great lucky ones, like Heinrich Schliemann—even if he hadn't discovered Troy—or Howard Carter, who discovered the tomb of Tutankhamen. Petrov went to Luxor, to the Valley of the Kings, made his way down the steep staircases into the cool darkness of the tomb, listened to the entertainingly mendacious stories of the lean and wiry guides and revelled in the astonishment that Carter must have experienced when he saw before him the fabulous treasures of the boy Pharaoh that were later to fill a great museum in Cairo.

He gave an enthusiastic, lively—some critics even called it "inspired"—account of all this in a book, then traced the footsteps of Schliemann and wrote another book that was every bit as good as the first. Since then he had brought out a dozen successful books that were frequently republished and had been translated into other languages. They were books that had been written out of a depth of scientific knowledge, even though their author was of far too lazy a disposition to make any significant discovery himself. To be quite honest, however, his trouble was

not laziness, but simply that his gift was not for research but for popularisation. Among leading archeologists his books were dismissed as "fiction" and "entertainment". Personally he could see nothing wrong in popularisation. Such books were written to attract people to science who would otherwise never have come anywhere near it—particularly young people. Anyway he didn't much mind what his former colleagues thought. He could quite easily have achieved their rank in science, but had preferred not to try. The few real giants, who did advance science, never read his books. Come to that, they never read anything except Simenon, Agatha Christie and the new San-Antonio series, written in the first person by a heart-throb hero who was supposed to be a commissar of police. The big men in science usually had at least one foreign language at their command and therefore never ran short of such reading matter.

He always enjoyed beginning a new book, just as he enjoyed shooting and fishing, and travelling around those old Russian cities that were saturated in history and the real, not affected, traditions of his ancestors. He had also had love-affairs, not many, just a few real ones, but as for any proper family life, that seemed to have passed him by. About five years ago he and his wife had tacitly granted each other complete freedom, while remaining under the same roof and at the same table. They were tired of pretending they needed

each other. From the very start they had built the shrine of married life not on love but on the sober worldly principle that everyone ought to have a family. They liked each other and got on well together and they enthusiastically brought into the world a son, who had now grown up into a sullen, introspective young man whose only demand on his parents was that they should leave him alone. They also had a daughter, who was just entering the age that fathers find most unpleasant of all, when that pure and tender domestic creature that you have scarcely dared to breathe upon up to now is suddenly assailed by the rough, grasping hands of noisy long-haired youths in disgustingly tight jeans that emphasise the crookedness of their legs, the boniness of their bottoms and the pride of newly mature manhood. With his consciousness Petrov realised how natural and inevitable it all was, and also that the young males whose mere appearance he found insulting were, in fact, quite decent lads, the makers of tomorrow's science, engineering, art and literature. All the same he could not overcome his emotions, and found himself disliking his daughter. And his daughter began to avoid him, drawing closer to her mother than ever before. Oh well, what did it matter! Apparently in latter years his relationship with his wife had depended not on spiritual affinity, not on sex, not on force of habit, but on the children. Now the young birds had flown from the

nest—even if not in the literal sense—and the little untidy hole that remained had lost all its attraction. They had given each other complete freedom of action without any agonising and futile explanations. In all honesty, neither of them abused his newly acquired freedom. Sometimes Petrov even began to wonder if his wife had anyone outside the family. If she had—and she was neither too old nor too saintly—this man must be a pastmaster in the art of apparent absence. One never had so much as a smell of him at any time of the day or night, or any season of the year. But perhaps Petrov simply wasn't trying to be observant.

Outwardly it was still almost a model family. They kept open house and the atmosphere was rather that of a holiday resort than of day-to-day family life. In those welcoming faces and clear eyes there was not so much as a smouldering ember of any wall-shaking quarrels or suffocating scenes of jealousy—there had been none. Privately Petrov thought of his family life as that of primitive man. While *he* provided food, *she* kept the home fire going. And so they were drifting calmly and inevitably into old age...

Petrov was the kind of person who never forgets his origins. For him the past was just as real and substantial as the present. His emotional life and memory were one, although this did not prevent him from scoffing at writers who put childhood above

everything else in life, as though all the rest were merely a leafy overgrowth on the sweet tuber of youth. When he attended the annual school reunion party, the faded faces of his friends pleased him not because they brought with them memories of the school in its ancient columned and stuccoed mansion, built by Rastrelli, or somebody like him, of the majestically sad Pokrovsky Barracks, the River Yauza between its banks of burdock and stinging nettles, and the shaky single-car tram, bearing the letter "A" and known affectionately as "Annushka", jangling past, but because of the sense of peace and security they gave him. Here he could relax like a sleeping cat without fear of any underhand blow. Of course, the Pokrovsky Barracks, the Yauza, the school in its aristocratic white and sky-blue mansion, and the shaky tram-car making its tireless round of Moscow, were also directly involved in this feeling. That was all very well, but there was no need always to be calling up the spirits of the past. The elderly boys and girls from the Pokrovsky Gates were good enough as they looked today; all the rest was better implied than stated. This was probably why they never spoke of their schooldays and the notorious "Don't you remember?", supposedly the touching refrain of all reunions, school and army alike, was scarcely heard.

But all of a sudden the past had hit Petrov in the solar plexus. It swam into his ken one

frosty February day in 1943 in the shape of a little by-street at the back of the Conservatoire, on a strangely sad, light evening, when a moon that was just beginning to wane hung between two dark barrage balloons, its pure radiance playing havoc with the dark blue shadows of blacked-out Moscow. It was the worst ever period in Petrov's life, worse than the front line and hospital, worse than the unbearable nights spent at the bedside of his fevered, purple-faced child. Generally he did his best not to think about those days, and if ever he did he was careful to reassure himself with the thought that everything passes.

But does it? Does anything ever really pass? Even physical pain does not pass without a trace. Otherwise he would not at the age of fifty still be hating the big grey house in Chernyshevsky Street, where at the back of a dark and smoky courtyard lived the dentist who had done his teeth for him the only time in his life—at seven—when he had to have them done. The dentist's drill that instantly hollowed out a place for the filling in one small milk-tooth turned that insignificant little corner of Moscow into a place of unbearable horror forever. So how could one imagine that there would be no aftermath from the pain inflicted by a far deeper drilling administered under the local anaesthetic of false and evasive words? Nothing is ever completely forgotten. Certain nerve cells may die within you, but you still carry them in

you and their dead weight clogs the flow, integrity and quickness of life.

Yet he still managed to live with these memories, and in recent years they had not been so much of a burden to him. And all of a sudden it turned out that in his present, not terribly elevated emotional torment—for however simple he was, he realised that his sad and serious role had been devalued by the triviality of the play in which he had been forced to act—a gold nugget had gleamed forth, so small and unimpressive that he had forgotten about it for twenty years or more, and yet so firm and enduringly bright that its radiance had pierced the gloom of approaching old age.

Before that long-ago meeting in the by-street behind the Conservatoire he had spent almost a year in hospital, where he was having the crushed toes on his left foot shortened. Before that he had spent nearly a whole day at the front line in close proximity to the fighting, and before that there had been another seven months in which he had been trained as a platoon commander at an infantry school, where all the time and effort spent on his training had been wasted: he managed to get himself invalided out without having done a single thing to repay his country for training him.

It should be pointed out that long before Alexander Matrosov had covered a German machine-gun embrasure with his body, thus

allowing his comrades to move into the attack, the idea of just such a glorious act had already risen as a vague shadow in Petrov's mind. That is why he had joined up as a volunteer, leaving college in his third year and the woman he loved more than anyone else in the world. If only he had known, when he kissed his love goodbye—she had married him as a farewell gesture—that his heroic impulse would turn out such a flop! But in war everything is just as unexpectedly complicated as it is in peace. It is only when one sticks flags in a map, puzzling out the mysterious statements of the Informbureau, that one has an illusion of clarity. This is the front line, this is the rear. Here are the enemy and here are our men. Here there is fighting, and here there is no fighting. But in fact everything is much more complex. For a start, the real war took volunteer Petrov away for seven months to a sleepy town on the Volga where the infantry training school was located in a dank brick barracks. He had not aimed at an officer's career, he had merely wanted to fight, but it was explained to him in coldly explicit terms that the state had not given him a secondary education and two years at college just in order to expend him in the ranks. His surplus education stood between him and deeds of valour. And not for the first time, incidentally.

In July he had gone off to the front with a battalion of student volunteers from Moscow colleges. They had reached Vyazma,

footsore from the badly fitting climbing boots with which they had been issued, and their stomachs reeling from the bad soup and concentrated peas on which they had been fed. It was a "march on our guts", as the young and laughter-loving head of their faculty put it. At Vyazma they were suddenly overtaken by an order that all students should go back to their studies. Then Petrov chose what seemed to him the simplest road to war—he went to the district recruiting office. To no avail. The order had come into effect. All students were to finish their studies, and with astonishing efficiency their identity cards were promptly provided with reserved occupation slips. In the end, however, his persistence won the day, helped by the steady losses of junior and middle rank officers in the field. He was told that if he agreed to being trained as a lieutenant he would be accepted. He did agree and set off for the Volga, where the would-be platoon commanders combined an exhausting training programme with the affections of the loving Volga girls. Petrov, however, merely bit into the granite of military science, and spent the only free time he had on long letters to his wife.

In March of the following year the whole course was sent to the front. Petrov's training as a lieutenant had not shaken his ingenuous notions of a clearly mapped front line dividing space into zones of war and peace. It took them an eternity to reach the war

zone, first by train, then in lorries. They passed through Moscow and the battlefields of the previous autumn and winter. They passed through liberated cities and left Novgorod behind, its dilapidated crosses gleaming dully amid whitish clouds, and then they saw a heavy gun and a squad of soldiers scurrying round it. From time to time the gun fired with a tremendous roar and recoil and Petrov decided that this must be the war. But even that was left behind and they again began passing through quite peaceful snowy fields, with occasional half-ruined or untouched villages, where there were women and children and old men. The churned-up roads streamed away under their wheels with dead horses strewn by the wayside. Then they came to a big populous village where somebody was playing the accordion, where there were plenty of army and civilian personnel about, where pretty girl signallers kept darting from one house to another clutching their cotton padded jackets together at the neck, where jeeps and lorries with clanking broken sides rushed by or skidded to a halt—all this noisy, busy, cheerful turmoil of officers, men, country folk and eye-catching girls was known as the army's support area.

Their senior officer disappeared somewhere and Petrov got so frozen in his light greatcoat—there had been no time to fit them out properly for winter and it was a bitterly cold and windy day—and was so tired and shaken

by the bumpy journey that he was no longer trying to make out what was going on around him. All he wanted was to get as quickly as possible to the other war, a war where they didn't career around in jeeps, play accordions or goggle at the shapely legs of girl signallers, but got on with the serious business of fighting the enemy.

Again they set off on their travels, bumping along now fast now slow, and again the roadside was littered with overturned sledges and dead horses, hacked by soldiers' knives about the ribs and chest. Gas-generator trucks with burners like huge tea-urns on either side of the driver's cabin laboured short-windedly towards them. Wrecked guns and tanks and stacks of shell boxes became more frequent; wastrel war was dumping its belongings by the wayside and withdrawing ever further into the frosty vastness. They reached a fresh village and there was another long wait for the officer in charge, who eventually returned with warm loaves, rock-hard black sausage and flasks of cooling pure alcohol. This was the division headquarters and some of the lads got off here. The others went on further through an ugly, shell-maimed forest, and the road, torn to pieces by mortar bombs and caterpillar tracks, got even bumpier. They went past some peasant sledges driven by elderly soldiers and had a sudden whiff not of war but of the country, of straw, hay and live horses, and then, on a melancholy patch of

open ground that looked like a Tatar graveyard with its oddly protruding stones—the remains of some devastated hamlet—they climbed out of the lorry and started chasing the war on foot.

The undiluted spirits that had fastened on to his brain, the stomach-clogging bread and his general tiredness put Petrov into a kind of coma. He vaguely remembered a pinewood and the log roofs of dug-out shelters. An officer in a flanellette shirt with his braces dangling was rubbing his rubicund neck with snow. It was he who took over the rest of their group, except for Petrov and his senior, who tramped on further.

One glade followed another and the woods between were either perfectly intact, down to the last twig, or maimed by shellfire, like the other cripple they had seen way back. Out of a fire-ravaged birch grove they emerged on the edge of a valley traversed by a snowed-up river, its banks marked only by bare canes and withered grass. Beyond the river to the left a stretch of woodland loomed dark against the snow, and the rest of the expanse was a murky emptiness, where no war could possibly lie hidden. By this time Petrov was muddled enough to think that they had somehow got through the war zone and come out to a place where, again, there was no war. Yet, despite this obvious fact, the senior officer spoke of some battle that was supposed to be in full swing and pointed out a dug-out

which he described as an observation post. With a mixture of weariness and sadness Petrov thought that they had not yet reached the real war. He could not even hear its voice, although that perhaps was because they had come out to the leeward of it.

The senior officer took Petrov into the semi-darkness of the dug-out, where an acrid fug made his eyes water. The officer then disappeared. Petrov waited and waited for him until, deafened by the bellowing of signallers and blinded by the smoke, he had to scramble out into the trench. His senior was not there either. Apparently he had dumped Petrov forever and gone off in search of his own war. Petrov was not offended, but felt even more lonely, though he had no more than a nodding acquaintance with the man. At this point two figures emerged from the dug-out—a major in a shaggy half-length sheepskin and the senior political organiser in a soldier's greatcoat.

"Are you a Komsomol member?" the senior political organiser asked.

"Er... Yes, of course."

"Then you'll be Komsomol organiser for the regiment. Temporarily, just while we're in action."

"Svetlyakov was killed," the major explained. Evidently he was the regiment commander.

The senior political organiser gave Petrov a prickly glance.

"Can you cope?"

"I don't know," Petrov confessed honestly. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Personal example's the main thing," the political organiser began, but something unexpected must have happened in this mysterious war that refused to reveal itself to the uninitiated, because both commanders darted hastily back into the dug-out.

But even the few words he had got out of the senior political organiser cheered Petrov a little. He tried to shake off his stupor and prepare himself for action. He was massaging his taut stomach and swallowing hard to get rid of the heartburn, when the major reappeared.

"Pravdukhin!" he bellowed into nowhere. "Off on the loose again... Komsomol organiser!" he continued to shout, although Petrov was only a few feet away from him. "Take this to No. 2!" And he pushed a paper into Petrov's hands.

"What No. 2?"

"Well, that's a fine thing to ask!" the regiment commander exclaimed. "Commander of No. 2 Battalion—Solonchakov."

"And where is Comrade Solonchakov at present?" Petrov inquired politely.

"In action... Where'd you expect him to be?!" the regiment commander replied, and disappeared once again.

Luckily a sergeant-major carrying an enormous thermos flask jumped into the trench at that moment.

"Where is No. 2 Battalion?" Petrov asked him.

"Over there!" the sergeant-major pointed briskly to the stretch of woodland.

Petrov headed for the wood across the snowy, shell-ploughed field and across the river, whose slippery surface lightly dusted with snow suddenly made itself felt underfoot, and a strange sense of danger clamped down on his shoulders, chilled his forehead and forced him into a crouch. He had been taught about war in a hurry and was not ready for even the minor practical test of getting from the regimental OP to the OP of a battalion engaging the enemy. He knew route marching and ceremonial marching, he could form up a platoon and occupy a defensive position, he could solve a few tactical problems on paper, but he had no idea of how to find his way across country or identify enemy fire. He had a child's conception of the frontal zone as a line with our men on one side of it and their men on the other. But his body sensed the danger and looked after itself. He was still a long way from the wood when he realised that the field was in the line of fire and the air criss-crossed with quietly singing strings. Whether the enemy was actually aiming at him or just keeping up the pressure on the OP and its communications was not the point. He had a fair chance of walking into one of those fatal strings. So he crouched and weaved among the snowdrifts,

running in short dashes, almost as he would have done if he had known the very first thing about war.

He reached the wood and was shown the shelter occupied by Solonchakov, a worried and irascible captain, who asked curtly: "Who are you?" "Regiment Komsomol organiser!" Petrov responded smartly. "You looked different a little while ago," the captain remarked. He scanned the message, crumpled it in his fist and pounced fiercely on an elderly man in a camouflage cape so filthy that Petrov wondered how he had managed to get it like that in the surrounding whiteness. The word "communication" floated up several times in the stream of blood-curdling abuse. Petrov felt aggrieved at having caused the disgrace of this honourable man in his filthy cape, but he was even more aggrieved that there was no war here either. He wanted to concentrate, to think out what was going on and find his place in it, not a place allotted him by chance, but one properly thought-out, chosen once and for all—a place with a machine-gun embrasure: but his task was far from easy. The first thing he had to do was find a map, but at that moment the captain's voice reached him: "Komsomol organiser! You've done enough hanging about! Take this to Shishkin!"

Petrov set off in the scantily indicated direction and soon almost became involved in actual war. The Germans hit the wood with

their artillery. Petrov lay under the huge stump of a half-uprooted pine, while mud fountains spouted round him, boughs cracked and trees crashed groaning to the ground. After lying there for ten minutes Petrov decided this would never end and he must carry out his orders. He rose and, still crouching, ran forward, stumbling over branches and tree trunks, and whipped on by showers of earth and snow. But when the bombardment was over he realised that even this was not war. After all, even the rear services came under shell-fire, but war was direct confrontation with the enemy. There he was, right in front of you, and you had to go through all obstacles to get at him and wring his neck.

But when Petrov did come face to face with war, he forgot all about what he had to do. It happened towards evening. He had been sent back and forth so regularly that he was actually beginning to know the ground, to recognise the different sounds of the mortar shells coming his way and those that would miss him altogether, to distinguish machine-gun and submachine-gun fire, and the gurgling roar of the heavy shells that were harmless because bound for distant targets. A little longer and he would have got the hang of things and been able to discard the Hermes sandals he must have inherited from the former Komsomol organiser who had been killed. Petrov was not at all keen on the part of supernumerary messenger-boy and he de-

cided to have it out with the senior political organiser. If he had been appointed to represent the Komsomol, let him do his job, but at least tell him what it was—putting out a news-sheet, making a speech, or enrolling somebody in the organisation. He was ready for anything as long as he got to the front line, where he was quite prepared to demonstrate the force of personal example. He felt happier when he had made the decision. But physically he was still in a bad way. The bread was a solid lump in his belly and a sulphurous heartburn was playing hell with his gullet. But so what! The main thing was to get to the war.

But the war had already been staring him in the face for several seconds with the terrified, blue eyes of a German soldier.

Petrov had been crawling forward with the mortar shells whining round him and had almost bumped foreheads with a young German lad of about nineteen, probably just as much a greenhorn as himself, who had also probably been sent on some errand and had taken cover in this alien wood, who probably did not know the terrain either and had not been trained for danger and direct contact with the enemy, and who possibly was by no means a coward but was now well nigh paralysed by the present encounter. All this Petrov realised later. At the time, when he saw before him in such unbelievable proximity the pale sharp-nosed youthful face under

its big-browed helmet, he too was petrified—not with fear but with some quite different and more complex feeling. Among other things it was compounded of revulsion, the acute physical revulsion one has towards any inimical substance, and an almost tearful resentment at the fact that the German had got so far beyond where he was supposed to be, and a vague disgust over the possible outcome of this encounter. But it was only later that he was able to sort out these sensations, and then it was hard to decide what he had actually experienced and what he had invented afterwards. At the time the two boys, thrown together in this mortar-mangled wood, still staring fixedly and working hard with elbows and knees, crawled backwards crab-like away from each other. Petrov stopped only when his heels stuck in the tangled roots of two pines that had grown together. Then he scrambled to his feet, leaned over a low springy branch and vomited. He spewed up everything—the warm rye bread, the rock-hard black sausage, the alcohol, the blue-eyed German and himself as well. And after that he felt a little better.

But what ought he to have done? Killed that weedy lad in his chamber-pot helmet? There was something false in such an act that was so natural a part of warfare. He was quite prepared to kill German soldiers, but not the particular German into whose eyes he had had time to look. And certainly not one so young,

sharp-nosed and utterly confused. Later on, probably, he would be able to kill Germans, regardless of appearance, age or mental state, but it would take time to reach that point. At the moment, however, he would probably have found it easier to block a gun embrasure with his own body. Then he pulled up short: did not this pitiable and laughable incident exclude his subsequent act of heroism at a gun embrasure? He realised, however, that the gun embrasure was not only not excluded, it had now become an absolute necessity. Turning all this over in his mind, he went back to the OP to have his show-down with the regiment's senior political organiser. The show-down never took place because Petrov was wounded. The doctors at the hospital asserted afterwards that it must have been a shell splinter. Except for the toe of his left boot being cut off as if by a sharp knife, he was quite unharmed.

In the hospitals, first in the field and then in the rear, they saved all they could. He might have lost his foot, but he got off with the loss of some of his toes. The least necessary of all, the little toe, survived intact, and to help what was left of the others he was fitted out with a gutta-percha substitute. It was a neat job, but for some reason it didn't help much. At first he had to rely on crutches, then on a stick. He could not make a step without it. How absurd! Just a few small bones missing and you were a cripple!

While he was still in hospital he gradually learned to walk on his shortened foot with the help of a maple stick, which his neighbour in the next bed, a soldier from Vologda, a skilled wood carver, decorated with some fascinating patterns. There was something else, of no less importance, that he learned in hospital. He could not forget his encounter with the German. It was as though the German he had allowed to get away had fired the fatal shot that had knocked him, Petrov, out of action. He resolved never to tell anyone about the incident and to smother in himself even the humiliating memory.

His mixture of confusion, repulsion and magnanimity could only have been vindicated by him becoming a hardened fighter, merciless to the enemy and to himself alike. But now it was not at all likely that he would be allowed to embody the image of a merciless soldier, as the doctors persisted in talking about demobilisation. Meanwhile, no doubt, the young German, if he hadn't got completely lost in that no man's land wood, had recovered from the shock and was making murderous play with his submachine-gun. That was why there could be no magnanimity in war. But there was no need to take too much on oneself. There had not been all that much magnanimity in his action; very little, in fact. But there had been some and, even worse, there had been confusion, feebleness and the devil knows what else.

Without knowing why, one night when sleeping tablets were no use against the pain of his amputated toes, Petrov confided in the old soldier from Vologda in the next bed. The "old" soldier was only a little over thirty, but he had already been in three wars. He listened to Petrov's story calmly, without interrupting, and only occasionally ducking under the covers to drag at his cigarette, because smoking was not allowed in the ward. With a little chuckle he said finally, "Well, that's nothing! The first time we were in action, I pissed my pants right through when our commander took us over the top. Lucky the sun's so hot out there in the steppes. I got dry and the lads never noticed it." Something snapped inside Petrov. Perhaps not directly, but by implication the old soldier had compared his action to this ultimate disgrace. "It wasn't because I was scared," he said miserably. "I can't make out why it happened." "That's just what fear is, when you can't make things out. A lot of things like that happen in war—and not only to the rank-and-file. Afterwards, of course, you get used to it, but fear never wears off entirely. And don't you believe it if somebody starts shooting you the line that it does. I've been decorated four times now and there was a whole rigmarole in the newspapers about me—fearless fighter and all that cock. But where does the fearlessness come in, I ask you, when you're made of flesh and blood and there's

nothing to protect you? It's a lot of hot air. There's nothing so surprising in your crawling away from that German, and his crawling away from you. Anyone would have been scared out of his wits, bumping head-on into the enemy like that, first time in action. Stands to reason!"

This provided food for some unusual thinking. Another time the old soldier corrected Petrov when he complained of never having seen war. "Of course, you've seen it. You're not here from falling off the stove, are you? And they wouldn't have put a deserter in with me. The fact is you've been very lucky. You'll get along fine without a few toes, and above all, your conscience is clear."

But Petrov's conscience was not appeased and he listened avidly to his neighbour's leisurely reflections, taking them into consideration but not accepting them as a solace for his soul.

While excusing Petrov's behaviour towards the German and approving his brief service in the frontal zone, the old soldier simply could not grasp how, as an exempted third-year student, he had come to be there at all. "They had no right to enlist you, if it was down in your papers!" "But I asked them myself..." "You ought to have complained to the right quarter. That'd soon have put a stop to it! Who said that all the rules go overboard just because there's a war on!" the veteran

expostulated. "I was a volunteer! Can't you see—a volunteer!" For some reason Petrov was ashamed to utter that perfectly truthful word. "What if you were," the veteran stuck to his line of argument. "You had professors teaching you, I reckon. How much did that cost!? They ought to have let you finish your studies."

Petrov then asked him whether, if he had not been called up, he would have gone himself. "Not been called up, me? How could that be? Am I sick or a cripple? Am I blind or ruptured?" "No, I don't mean that. Suppose they just didn't call you up." "Such things never happen. Who would they have to drive the enemy out?" "Others would do that," Petrov argued. "Put it like this. They had enough men, so they left you at home to keep the girls company. Would you have gone of your own accord?" "There couldn't have been enough without me," the veteran persisted. "Who could take my place?" "A good place never goes begging. Somebody else would take it, someone no worse, or maybe even better, than you," Petrov egged him on. "You mean, like in the old days, when the rich men bought up recruits to serve for their sons?" the soldier sneered. "Well, look at it this way. Or they might have just overlooked you, forgotten about you. Or they had too many, and told you to go home because they could do without you." "Oh, in that case," the soldier broke into a smile and his face

softened and relaxed, "with pleasure!"

Petrov gave up: it would have been too long and too complex a task to make him understand. Scarred and exhausted though he was by all the fighting he had been through, the soldier stubbornly refused a helping hand. "Who could take my place?" That was the main thing. For him there was no problem of whether to volunteer or not, and abstract reasoning on the subject was useless. Petrov, on the other hand, could have let the war pass him by, but had chosen not to and, no matter what the soldier said, he had been right. But as for the fact that it had got him nowhere—that was something different. The old soldier's reasoning was wise and exonerating. But his other maxim of "Who could take my place?" was far nearer the mark.

From hospital Petrov was sent before a panel and passed fit for non-combatant duties. At the sight of his disappointed face the chairman of the panel said, "You're a third-year student, they'll gladly demobilise you." But that was just what Petrov did not want.

His return to Moscow was one of the most wretched experiences of his life. He somehow sensed it in advance and gave his wife no word of his coming. He decided to go first to his mother for a breather, and then proceed from there. But when he climbed out of the carriage at the Leningrad Station in Moscow with other servicemen—men on leave, on official

business or disabled—the camaraderie of the road and the sense of being a soldier in uniform got hold of him. Here he was in his prickly greatcoat, canvas-topped boots fitting neatly over his quilted trousers, and an individually styled peak-cap that he had swapped in hospital for his fur cap with earflaps. Leaning deftly on his maple walking stick and tucking his thumb in the strap of his pack, he regretted that his wife was not there to meet him. All the boyishness he had retained flared up in expectation of that meeting—the front-line soldier returning to his true soldier's wife. But when he caught a glimpse of himself in the tall mirror of the station waiting room, he almost groaned with humiliation. A clumsy figure floated towards him out of the dusty glass. A thin, chicken's neck protruded from the stiff, halter-like collar of his greatcoat with a militiaman's cap on the strangely large head—for lack of the proper army purple, the individual hat-maker had used a red band, and the crown was militia blue. He was carrying a ridiculous gas-mask bag—no one else was, he quickly noticed—his belt was sagging under the weight of a pistol and the dirty kitbag completed the heroic picture. Added to all this, he looked no more than seventeen—a schoolboy who had run away to the front, or an army-adopted orphan who had not yet been properly fitted out.

He could not remember how he got home. When the first tearful fuss was over, his

mother said, "Good gracious, you're still only a boy! How could I have let you go!" Then she rummaged in a cupboard and brought out something big and grey and moth-eaten, which he at first took for a blanket but which turned out to be his father's old cavalry greatcoat. His mother had kept it since the Civil War. No one wore that kind now with its long skirts almost reaching the ground, its long slit at the back, pointed lapels and arrow-shaped turnback cuffs. It was elegantly waisted and, despite a faint smell of the ranks, the cloth suggested that it was an officer's coat and rather a stylish one at that. It hung perfectly, giving Petrov extra height, of which he had plenty already. It hid the canvas tops of his boots and left only the leather uppers showing. He felt excited. This was the coat that had hugged his father's youthful frame, the father he had never known because their ways had parted on the very threshold of consciousness and memory. The coat had protected his father from cold, rain and snow, but not from bullets, and the tiny criss-cross stitches marked the places where the lead had entered. The sweaty flanks of weary horses had heaved under the greatcoat's long skirts and the sparks of campfires had scorched its pile. And now this fire- and battle-scarred greatcoat was to serve a junior lieutenant, fit for non-combatant duties, who had come out of battle almost before he had got into it.

His mother produced the dark and cracked

but still splendid sword-belt and cloth hat with yellowed fleecy ear-flaps and fixed the red star to it. When Petrov had pulled on the hat and tightened the belt, his mother said, "Now I see you have changed and grown into a man." He himself viewed his reflection in the glass with unexpected interest. He liked the thinness of his brown cheeks and the firm line that had appeared round his once irritatingly soft mouth. With a face like that he could make something of life.

His wife and her close-knit family soon showed Petrov that he had overestimated the determined line of his newly firm mouth. His wife had acquired new friends. She had never had any close girl companions, always preferring the reliability of male friendship. This time the friends were two young giants: a beardless Dobrynya Nikitich*, who turned out, to Petrov's surprise, to be a reserved-occupation flute-player—despite his splendid physique he suffered from bad nerves—and a sailor, lately released from hospital, with a broad chest and the evasive glance of an Alyosha Popovich.** The young giants were somewhat disconcerted by Petrov, and this at first afforded him a certain satisfaction, as though it proved his maturity and special rights over Nina. He loved Nina and trusted her. It never entered his head that the giants might also

* Hero of Russian folklore.—*Tr.*
** Hero of Russian folklore.—*Tr.*

have acquired certain rights over her. Their embarrassment was undoubtedly that of the poachers.

He had been in love with Nina since they went to school together. In their ninth year she had moved to another district and another school and become inaccessible. For more than a year, however, he never left her doorstep, patiently and regretfully listening to the hypocritical condolences of Nina's mother, a big, handsome, brown-skinned woman, like a Creole. Devoted, trusting and persistent, he came again and again, oblivious of the fact that Nina's mother was openly mocking him—why did she dislike him so much? He was baffled by the coolness of his beloved and wondered what he had done to deserve it. Eventually he stopped visiting, realising all of a sudden that he could not stand the gloating cannibalistic smile on the mother's brown face. He never knew what forces took Nina away from him, although he suspected their existence.

They met again two years later in the south. It was a simple, affectionate and sad encounter. Nina, brown-skinned, white-toothed and big—the image of her mother—had grown even more beautiful, but her beauty was that of a woman rather than a girl, and Petrov realised that he still loved her and had never stopped loving her. But he dared not even mention that. Nina was a year older than he. At school the difference had not been felt,

especially as they sat at the same desk, Nina having started school a little late. He had felt the difference in the brief hours they had spent together after her move to another part of town. Something lazily patronising had crept into her voice and her whole manner, as though she knew certain facts of which he was ignorant. Probably she did. After their long parting, Petrov caught himself treating her like a grand lady. Why the hell! He was no boy himself. Hadn't he had an affair with a married woman! But in Nina's presence this brilliant victory—whose was the only doubtful point—slumped strangely in value. He followed Nina around to the mixed beach and up into the mountains without a hope of getting her interested in his dull personality. But in some incomprehensible way her interest had been aroused.

On the day of her arrival at the resort Nina had spotted him at the station. He was seeing somebody off. It was a girl named Tanya, whom he had met a few days before at sea, during a storm. "She was drowning and you saved her?" Nina asked derisively. "She saved me." "You're joking?" "No, I got cramp in the leg and she's a wonderful swimmer." "And what happened after that?" "Nothing." If he had been more astute and experienced, he would not have replied like that—Nina's liquid dark-brown eyes were afire with the dry flame of jealousy. "Don't tell lies!" Surprised, he recalled without enthusiasm

that he and Tanya had visited the canyons together. By the light of the full moon the deeply fissured cliffs looked like a line of Hamilcar's fighting elephants—or anything else one liked to regard as a fitting comparison. And before that they had drunk a glass of fruit wine at a stall. "What a fascinating programme! You've never invited me to the canyons. Who is this girl?" "She's finishing at technical school. She's got a job." "What as?" "She didn't say." "A hairdresser, I suppose." "I don't know. I shouldn't think so. She intends to get into a teacher training college. She's very quiet." All the evening he and Tanya had scarcely exchanged a dozen words. What else had he discovered? That Tanya lived alone with her aunt. Petrov had wanted to know more, but Tanya had merely smiled. If he pressed her, she would answer in a childishly hoarse whisper, "Why should you know that?"

Nina's inexplicable persistence stirred in him something he had not wanted to touch. Why had he suddenly jumped on the battered old bus that was taking Tanya to the station? No holiday intimacy had sprung up between them. They had made no dates in Moscow, given each other no addresses or phone numbers. They had said goodbye near the little house where Tanya was renting a corner of the veranda, smiled at each other, and in the morning he had gone galloping off to the bus-stop like a madman and caught the bus

just as it was leaving. After twenty dusty and jolting kilometres of silence he had dumped her light suitcase on the top step of the carriage. She had waved to him and disappeared behind the train stewardess. He patrolled the carriage windows and spotted her round taut little face, like a children's ball, behind the grimy glass. She started tugging at the window but it wouldn't open and she abandoned the attempt. At such moments even close friends and lovers are at a loss. But here there was no sense of frustration or emptiness. Life grew tense, time quickened its pace. Petrov suddenly noticed what fluffy eyes Tanya had. In those long lower and upper lashes there gleamed the pure light of reliability, seriousness and kindness. If only the train would not leave!.. And as soon as the thought struck him the buffers clanked and the carriage quietly floated away. He walked after it and at the end of the platform saw Tanya press her temple against the window frame to get a last glimpse of him. Her huge eyelashes were matted with tears. He nearly cried himself, but then drank a glass of cloudy Riesling in the station buffet and felt suddenly and joyfully at ease. He was grateful to fate for this short acquaintance, this strange and tender sigh.

The emotion stirred up by Nina swept through his heart and passed away, this time forever. Beside him was the woman he had loved since the day he learned what love was.

Here she was, big and striking, all warm with the sunshine, a delight to him in every word she spoke, in every movement—even if the words were neither clever nor kind, and the movements clumsy. And besides now, when he had lost all hope, this woman was gazing at him with those liquid, brown eyes.

They became intimate. On a deserted beach, on a cold damp stretch of sand, with the torches of the frontier guards who were searching the beach winking still in the distance but steadily approaching.

Shaken and overwhelmed, full of gratitude, he at once forgave her the thing he had inwardly been prepared for: he was not her first love. After all, now they were quits, he assured himself, knowing that this was not true. Nina had suffered some defeat in grown-up life she had begun so young. She had rejected him not in favour of someone her own age or some fresh young attraction. It had been an affair of convenience, a big practical game initiated by her mother, who adored her daughter with an egotistical, overbearing and irrational love. Hence the beautiful cannibal's hatred of him. She had been afraid that he would pull Nina back into childhood, into some youthful foolishness and fancy. For her happiness existed in the form of a luxuriously appointed lair. This was how she had fashioned her own life, erecting the mighty edifice of a sleek and plentiful existence on the bowed shoulders of an

ungifted but hardworking and devilishly persistent administrator in the scientific field. Nina never fully understood this, but she unconsciously followed the designs of her mother—early maturing girls are attracted to men much older than themselves, their solid status in life being judged not from a crude material standpoint but as a sign of manly worth. But in this case something had gone wrong, and Nina was now firmly guiding Petrov back into her orbit. She was prompted both by her old attachment and her desire for revenge on her mother, who had bungled her life, and even more by the need for self-assertion. She deliberately exaggerated the poor and perfectly innocent Tanya in order to create the illusion of her triumphant irresistibility.

Thinking back after his unsuccessful trip round the by-streets behind the Conservatoire, Petrov tried to understand how seeing and how blind he had been in those far-off days. At times it seemed to him that he had even then perceived with his present cool insight the secret implications of all Nina's actions; at others he wrote himself off as a naive and trusting boy. The truth lay somewhere, not in the middle but to one side. You couldn't blame Nina for everything. She had been in her own way quite sincere towards him. She had needed him no less than he needed her. The difference was that he had

needed her for her own sake, while she had needed him merely to restore her feminine self-confidence. She had used him to heal a wound she had received in some other battle. She was grateful for the return of her self-assurance, for the feeling of her unlimited power over him, for his frankness in showing how happy he was with her. It was she who had suggested getting married when the war broke out. "It'll make it harder for us to lose each other." At that time it was possible to register a marriage and dissolve it all in one day, but Nina's mother commemorated this purely formal gesture with a tremendous row that combined tragic fervency with the lowest abuse. Her narrow logic must have told her that the boy must be put in his place at once. Let him realise that he had bitten off more than he could chew. And so it had turned out. Losing each other proved to be no trouble at all, even with a marriage registration in their passports...

When he found himself in his wife's home after coming out of hospital, Petrov discovered that he was no longer one of the family. Nina was mysterious, melancholy and remote, while his mother-in-law, constantly irradiating her cannibalistic smile, kept dropping dark hints about people who were never at home. Eventually it dawned on Petrov that his joining up and his intention of returning to the army were regarded almost as abandonment of his wife. He felt ashamed of his

mother-in-law and tried to pretend that her fault-finding passed unnoticed. And then, out of the remote depths of aloofness, indifference and bureaucratic conceit his father-in-law emerged with his thick lenses glinting telescopically. "What are your plans?" "I'm going back to the army." "What will you be there—storekeeper or clerk?" "Anything they make me." "I always dreamed of marrying my daughter to a storekeeper." And his father-in-law disappeared again into the opaque depths.

This was probably the point when Petrov was finally written off as hopeless. The campaign to drive him out of the house was launched and, strangely enough, sensitive though he was to other people's attitudes, it was some time before he realised it. It seemed to him that Nina was embarrassed by the attendance in the house every evening of the flute-player and the wounded sailor, but that she could not get rid of them and it was making her angry. And that the mother-in-law, a person of the old school, was even more irritated by the situation. He started going out in the evening in order not to stress by his presence the tactlessness of these importunate visitors. But his foot was still painful and he was seriously worried that the panel he had to go before again would disqualify him completely. He shared his apprehensions with Nina.

"What will happen then?" she asked in fright.

"I'll go back to the institute."

"But where will you live?"

"What do you mean? Is there something wrong, Nina?"

She burst into tears. He had never thought she could cry like this. She had imagined he would be going back to the front. Then she would have been able to sort things out and understand herself. Perhaps everything would have stayed the same between them. She loved him as a friend, as a fine person, as her youth and all that had been best in her life. And she might have been able to overcome her parents' hostility towards him. But now he was estranged from her. He should never have gone away when everything was still so frail and unstable, and at such a difficult time. Her two boy friends were wonderful and they were very fond of her, she couldn't possibly show them the door. Their chivalrous rivalry was so touching. So in that case...

"It's me who is to be shown the door," Petrov laughed grimly out of his own private desert. "Who have you chosen? Not the flute-player, I hope?"

"I don't know, I just don't know!" Nina said, weeping again. "Don't let's get divorced. Perhaps it'll all work out right."

He shrugged in amazement that she should attach any importance to such trifles.

He was helped by his father's greatcoat. He put it on, fastened the belt and shoulder-straps and, encased in its tough cloth, felt that

it was his duty to be manly. He couldn't start slobbering in such a greatcoat, even if only for the sake of its former owner. Trying not to limp, he walked out of the flat and went down the stairs. The February frost hit him in the chest and took his breath away.

...He and Nina met two years after the war. He had received a summons to appear in court for the hearing of the divorce case. That day his course was due to go out potato-digging at Lopasnya. He turned up in court in his old army trousers, padded jacket and top boots, so that he could go from there straight to the station. But he reached Lopasnya only on the last train, having spent the whole day and evening with his former wife. In court he had been ill at ease, referring to his wife by her second name and even as "citizen", awakening a regretful smile on her full, beautifully made-up lips. But she forgave him all his awkwardness and stupid embarrassment, and she behaved with a dignity, tact and goodwill that might have suggested that divorce was something quite in her line. Although they were divorced by mutual consent with the elastic formula of "incompatibility", Petrov felt that in the eyes of the judges and the few members of the public who were present he looked like the guilty party, a vicious breaker-up of family life, and that Nina was the suffering but graciously forgiving victim. Actually she needed the divorce to be able to marry the flute-player. Petrov had preferred

the sailor, but peacetime must have played its part and the gentle flute had won the day over the naval drum. Petrov felt neither jealousy towards the flute-player, nor any resentment towards Nina, nor even annoyance at the comedy of the divorce procedure, where he played his role so badly. In the past few years Nina had risen to her peak. Majestic as a cathedral, brilliant as a carnival, she evoked in Petrov a disinterested admiration. No matter that he looked shabby and insignificant in comparison with her. He could hardly believe that he had once kissed this radiant face and that this exultant body had once tenderly submitted to him. He had no intention of measuring his fate against hers, and by his open, joyous admiration he rose to her level, for which he received an unexpected reward. The flute-player was away on tour and Nina took him back with her to their new flat.

Strangely, it was only towards himself that he experienced a slight contempt that did not mar his elation, joy and astonished happiness. Nina remained on her pedestal, having performed an inexplicable but apparently essential womanly rite. For some reason she had needed this final gesture of generosity towards him, this *coup de grâce* that would somehow cancel his former humiliation. Petrov felt no pity for the flute-player and even gloated for a moment, but in his own heart he knew that he would have been better without this un-

necessary happiness, this expiation, this revenge, this gratuitous consolation.

After that they did not see each other for a long time, almost all their lives. And he heard nothing about her. She seemed to plunge into oblivion, or perhaps he did. They seemed to exist in different dimensions and could not meet on the terrestrial plane. And yet he met so many people in those years! Old friends from his childhood and college days, and a few front-line friends. On the platform at Malaya Vishera he had once even caught sight of the "old" soldier, who either didn't notice him or failed to recognise him through the carriage window. Always at the wrong moment he bumped into his former girl friends, the fleeting ones. He found himself face to face with people from a useless circle of holiday acquaintances, and bravely fought off the attentions of bogus distant relatives. But he never saw Nina, not even a trace, a shadow of her. No one mentioned her in conversation, though like anyone else he heard hundreds of familiar and unfamiliar names every day. Even the big flute-player, an indirect symbol of her existence, gave no one any hint of his existence. And Petrov's children were always switching on the television, the record-player and the transistors. But perhaps Petrov had forgotten or mixed up the name of the flute-player and his flute was on the air sometimes? Perhaps Nina had died? Petrov asked himself the question but

the bitter taste in his mouth from the days of his youth, which had not been sweetened by her belated gesture, left no room for sadness. He had cured himself of Nina and thought worse of her than in those legendary days, when the past had been his agonisedly lived life.

But one day when he did meet her in the street he at once lost all the sovereign calm and independence he had accumulated over the years.

Petrov was going on a fishing trip with a boyhood friend of his. As soon as they got on the road the usual subject of all such expeditions—"fuel"—came up for discussion. His friend had taken nothing with him, and Petrov, too, was empty-handed—he was relying on the snack-bars. But the snack-bars would not open until tomorrow, Saturday, and that meant not having anything at all to wash down with their most enjoyable supper. They drove up to a supermarket. He took his money out of the glove compartment of the car, ran across the road at the wrong place and, ignoring the traffic inspector's whistle, took refuge in the shop. A few minutes later he emerged happily with a bottle of "Extra" and two packets of Shipka cigarettes. He was trying to stuff the bottle into the pocket of his padded trousers and had almost succeeded in doing so when he heard a resonant woman's voice and did not immediately realise it was addressing him.

"Well!.. Where on earth have you been all this time!"

Petrov stared around and saw Nina. She was wearing the very same black astrakhan coat that he had seen her in last time, but now it had been lengthened to suit the fashion and came down over her tall leather boots. A knitted beret left open her dark, sultry face in its frame of chestnut braids. At first sight it seemed as if a miracle had occurred. Time had spared her completely. But it took only a few minutes to discover the sad traces of change, the crow's-feet, the sagging skin, the dark birthmarks on the neck, the faded hair and crowned teeth. Yet she was still beautiful for her age; it was easy to picture what once had been. And a liveliness that she had never had before benefited her looks.

Nina's excitement transferred itself to him and plunged him into mental and emotional confusion. It may also have dulled his powers of observation and logical deduction, and even his ear for intonation. Everything she said had the ring of triumph. She had long since separated from the flute-player. He had turned out to be a flash in the pan. But what did it matter! She had married the sailor. Didn't he remember? Oh yes, they had had a wonderful life together! Their son was already in the eighth class. Never a single bad mark. She had separated from her husband two years ago. Just like that. Now she was

living rather a long way from the centre, in Kuzminki. But the underground was near and there was such wonderful fresh air.

"And what about you?" she asked sympathetically, and the ringing voice sank a little.

"Oh, I'm all right," he was bracing himself for a more informative answer when she said with a strange gleam in her eyes:

"You look as if you're off on another potato-digging expedition?"

Moving back a little, she greedily inspected his spreading figure in the tight greasy padded jacket. Her big brown eyes missed nothing from the holes at the elbows to the torn-off button. They glided from the knit cap to the rubber boots turned down below the knees and rested on the bottle sticking out of his pocket.

"Is that ?.." and this unfinished phrase summed up her observations.

She'd taken me for an alcoholic, Petrov realised suddenly. The padded cotton suit with the bottle of vodka in the pocket... Yes, she must think she has guessed everything about me. But why didn't she let me give her a proper answer? For a building worker coming off the site my appearance would be quite permissible, but for a person of so-called intellectual pursuits the way I look is so uncharacteristic that she shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. How ruthlessly eager she is to grade me as a drunken wreck! Why has she assumed the worst so lightly? She

must be still settling scores with me, and a complete bankruptcy is the only thing that will satisfy her. That means she hasn't done too well herself?

Yes, at last he had got her in focus. Before him stood a woman who was no longer young, in a shabby coat that no amount of recutting and refashioning could improve. The cheap cosmetics, the crumbling mascara, the patchy purple-tone lipstick and rough-grained powder only intensified the destructive work of time and frustration. Life had long since released Nina from its warm embrace and put her out in the cold. When he realised this, Petrov no longer wanted to disillusion her about his decline. He laughed and spread his arms, as though acknowledging the truth of her bitter reproach.

"You're not in a hurry," Nina stated confidently. "Walk home with me. I want to talk to you and my lord and master hates it when I hang about in the streets." Her stress on the last phrase was intended to demonstrate the absurdity of her lord and master's jealous suspicions.

The lord and master was a retired colonel who for various complex reasons involving flats and family could not become her legal husband. He was a wonderful person, loved her son like his own, suffered a little from the pedantic army mentality, but on the other hand was an irreconcilable enemy of drinking and self-indulgence.

Petrov took the hint with a foolish grin, submitting more and more to the role that had been forced upon him.

In the underground train he remembered his friend, and wearily dismissed him from his mind. The carriage somehow separated him from Nina, although they were sitting together. She kept rummaging in her shopping bag or making irrelevant remarks, not really addressed to him, about her domestic affairs. But sometimes suddenly they would smile at one another, at something that was long since dead and buried and had not been re-animated by their meeting.

As the train took him further and further on his futile journey, Petrov felt like the hero of a farce, but it wasn't funny even when he tried to take the long view of what was happening. Something was hindering his saving sense of humour.

They came out of the underground and Nina suddenly told him he must not take her any further. Either she was afraid of her jealous "lord and master", or, more probably, she did not want the neighbours to see her with such a disreputable companion. Hasn't she or someone in her family ever even come across a book of mine or one of my articles in the magazines or newspapers? Still, I have such a common name that she might not associate me with the Petrov who writes and is written about. And even if she did, she wouldn't want to believe it. That's why she

was so obviously overjoyed to discover me as a down-and-out. She hasn't even asked what I do for a living. She can manage without that. The reassuring image of the bankrupt is conveniently lodged in her brain and it would be a pity to complicate or disturb it.

"Goodbye," she said. "I don't suppose we shall meet again."

"Why not?" he asked, sincerely sorry for this woman who had so confidently and unrepentantly ignored his love and everything that he stood for in life.

"How long do you expect to go on living?" she said coldly, and walked off in her everlasting astrakhan coat, quite indifferent, swinging her hips a little in a walk that made no attempt to play at youth.

She was gone and he ordered himself not to think about her. He must go back to his cursing but faithful friend, who would not have abandoned him.

It was not, of course, his meeting with Nina that had made him feel his age so acutely. The feeling had been building up gradually—spectacles, an unrelenting insomnia, predisposition to take offence and to break off relations when an explanation was still possible. He hated books with unhappy endings and was irritated by their authors. And there was much more that smacked of senile eccentricity. Petrov was quite resignedly and firmly aware of this, as a sign of his passing

into a different geriatric climate. The meeting with Nina was like a catalyst. It speeded up the relentless process of self-knowledge. Now he knew for sure that a future in which he would be able to put something right, to sort things out, or at least repent, did not exist any more for him or for those who had created and filled his spiritual life. And yet, apparently, he had still been counting on something. On what? On bringing back the past? On repentance? On being given his due? What rubbish! He had never had any such thoughts. And yet a vague, suppressed hope of some kind of spiritual come-back apparently existed, and he need not delude himself. Perhaps it was the hope of gaining a final sense of peace, not in the Lermontov sense of being buried under a shady oak tree—but a sense of peace in life. Yet in a mere half an hour all this had collapsed. It turned out that he needed absolutely nothing from the strange and estranged woman whom he had seen as far as the Kuzminki Underground. On the contrary, he had done everything possible to leave her in her comforting ignorance. So had ended the story that had begun at a pen-knife carved school desk.

But how strong it must have been in him if even now such an accidental, empty, absurd meeting had been able to turn him inside out like this! And how had he managed to survive when he had stepped out of Nina's house into the freezing desert in his moth-eaten cavalry

greatcoat, limping on his sore foot, neither soldier nor civilian, an ungraduated student, a husband to be turned to only in the last resort, a mere puppy who did not know how to snap back? The thought of suicide had even flashed through his mind but his mother, who understood everything, had hidden his revolver.

This was when the house near the Conservatoire had turned up. In a back lane, where he, a born-and-bred Muscovite and constant explorer of the city, had for some reason never been. The forgotten house stood at the beginning of the forgotten lane, if one walked from Nikitskaya Square. But the square had nothing to do with it really. They had reached the street through a backyard. Why had memory so carefully erased the geography of the event? So that there should be no way back? So that he should not become dependent on someone else's mercy? So that the golden beam of light should never be extinguished?

The accidental, chaotic and aimless nature of everything that happens to you so weakens and exhausts the soul that you begin to seek the meaning of symbols in places where there can obviously be no meaning at all. You persuade yourself that life is programmed at least in its fundamental stages, and yet in fact you are merely an exponent in Brownian motion—the meaningless chaos of human molecules. An unexpected push sends you

forward, sideways or back, and another push takes you in quite the opposite direction, and then with an air of profound wisdom you try to understand why it happened. And yet he would be damned if he should ever believe that he met Tanya by chance.

It happened like this. Still under threat of demobilisation, Petrov was hanging about the Main Political Department. After the usual evasive answer he came out into Frunze Street and bumped into a girl. He stepped aside and found himself bumping into her again. He grunted, "Excuse me!", and once again came up against that slim, shapely figure. He knew what the psychopathology of everyday life had to say about sidestepping and counter-stepping in the street and he was angry with himself. But after another fruitless attempt to walk past he realised that it was not his fault and that the girl had started the game. He emerged from his mental ditch and looked into her face. Not at once but through a long stream of associations—the sea, the cramp in his leg, the canyons, the dusty carriage, the end of the station platform and those soft, matted eyelashes—he recognised Tanya.

"Goodness, Tanya, is it you?"

She answered with a nod of her head and a flicker of eyelashes. Yes, it's me.

And then for a moment he doubted it. Her face now was not at all like that bouncy child's ball. It had flattened and paled and the curve of those firm cheek-bones had softened;

her whole appearance had acquired a feminine softness. Only the gold-flecked eyes between their long fluffy lashes were the same—young, clear and generously kind.

"How did you get here?" She was carrying a tightly packed briefcase. "On your way to an institute or from an institute? To the library?" He chattered away to stifle a strange pain that had assailed him.

She watched him with a smile. Silent as usual, she made no attempt to interrupt his flow of words.

"But you are so grown up now! You were a mere school girl then... No, I'm wrong! You were at technical school. You were studying and working at the same time. And you intended to get into a teacher training college, didn't you?" He was answering his own questions. "And you were living alone with your aunt. You see, I remember everything. I certainly remember the rescue operation!"

"And you? How are things with you?" she asked in a quiet and somehow sympathetic voice.

He fell back a little. Her voice seemed to imply that she knew of his misfortunes. But how could she! The walking stick, the lameness, the single star on his shoulder-straps. Certainly, there was no evidence of success there.

"I never made a Kutuzov..." he said with an awkward smile. "Or a Philemon either," he added, taking an abstruse pleasure in the fact

that she would not understand his second comparison.

"Perhaps it was the fault of Baucis?"

"What do you know about Baucis?" he muttered.

"Nothing."

"How do you know that I was married... Actually, not 'was'... I still am. Although I don't really know," he became more and more muddled and, in his irritation, said almost roughly, "Do you know anything about my wife?"

"No."

"But you mentioned Baucis?"

"Philemon and Baucis. We did that at college."

"Oh, you did! And why did you decide that she was to blame?"

"Of course, she was."

"And why wasn't I?"

"It couldn't have been you!" She held up her hand as if to defend herself from a snowball. "You're a holiday."

Petrov roared with laughter. He had seen himself as if in a mirror that reflected not only his external but also his inner self. He was so little in his own eyes, so valueless to himself and others in all dimensions and planes that this unexpected comparison put him into an almost pathological fit of laughter.

She watched patiently while his chest heaved with laughter, watched him wipe his eyes with a handkerchief and then blow his

nose into the same handkerchief and put it in his pocket, and then become exhaustedly calm.

Thus is man made, particularly when he is young and not dried up inside, like an autumn leaf. Petrov emerged from his laughter a different person. Not that he had believed he was really a holiday, but some other image of his personality had begun to dawn upon him. This girl had no reason to flatter him, to tell him untruths. A slight exaggeration was a different matter. She was well disposed towards him. Their brief meeting of long ago had lodged happily in her memory. And he himself would have remembered Tanya better if she had not been eclipsed by the presence of Nina. But why all this about Nina? Enough of Nina. Couldn't he live a minute without her? Here he was with no ties in the world and this girl with her fluffy eyelashes, full of light and kindness, in front of him. For the first time in many months the junior lieutenant felt something relax inside him.

"May I walk with you?" he asked.

"I've just got to give in these books," Tanya said.

"I'll wait for you."

Gratefully she let her thin gloved hand touch the cuff of his greatcoat. He was about to ask her not to go too fast but she at once fell in with his pace.

Petrov prepared himself for a long wait outside the students' library, but she returned

almost immediately—she had handed in the books and not ordered any others.

They walked through the twilight streets. Tanya took his arm and he felt the warmth of her small hand through the sleeve of his coat. All people make contact, whether in love, friendship, neighbourliness or business, through the exchange of information. But Tanya needed no information except that which a person's presence provided, and she saw no reason to supply information about herself. There was wisdom in this. The thing that matters is the living essence, not what a person thinks about himself. To be quite honest, what we tell each other is not an objective transmission of facts but merely our attitude to these facts in a more or less disguised form, in other words, our attitude to ourselves. But if you yourself do not know the facts then you cannot really know anything about the person you are talking to. If you are really interested in him you can learn more from his silence, from the fragments of everyday speech, from occasional outbursts of feeling, from his gestures, walk, glance and smile than from the most detailed oral questionnaire or an account of all the circumstances of his life that you know nothing about.

Unfortunately, he was slow to appreciate Tanya's wisdom. He gave a long disquisition on man's place in the war, spoke dispassionately but only half sincerely about his relations with his wife that had led to the present

break. Tanya did not help him with a single question or word of appraisal, agreement or disagreement. She was quite satisfied with the immediate and the obvious: his lameness, walking-stick and the freedom that allowed him to stroll around the town without hurrying back to some other woman.

Is she secretive or what? Petrov wondered to himself, irritated by his own eagerness to talk, which would not have seemed excessive if he had been with someone who talked to him.

But Tanya was the opposite, she was a person to be silent with. What if I keep silent too? Shall we just go on pacing around Moscow like a funeral procession? But he did not undertake the experiment. Tanya was, in fact, by no means secretive. She answered every direct question directly and with just a trace of a sigh. Her parents were dead, a long time ago. Both from TB. Her brother had been reported missing. Her aunt was an old maid. They lived alone together. She was studying at the institute it had been easiest to get into, not one of her choice.

None of this information brought him any nearer Tanya's inner self, but he could not help asking for it. "Couldn't you have chosen something you were interested in?" "No." "Why not?" "I'm not interested in any particular speciality." "But you must be interested in something?" She faced him calmly, those fluffy lashes now flaked with snow, and said, "Yes, in you."

And then, at last, he shut up, out of respect for her admission, and discovered the bliss of silence.

A silence between two people can be beautiful. They walked along the embankment, stopping and looking down at the black steaming water, fringed with yellowish ice. The balloons were rising slowly into the darkening sky. They seemed reluctant to depart into that empty desert above the roofs and chimneys; each had a wasp-like fold in its thick body. On the pavement round the Kremlin wall the bluish snow was deep and almost untouched but on the road it had been chewed down to the colour of asphalt by tyres and caterpillar tracks. On the branches of the trees and on the merlons of the wall it had an uncity-like sugary whiteness. There were few people about—the working day was not yet over. Besides, the wind from the river was cold and there were no houses, only high walls and the big open squares between them. What pedestrians there were preferred to guard their scanty warmth rather than stroll unnecessarily along the embankment.

They passed the wall of Kitai Gorod and went through the Kitai Lane into Nogin Square. Through a maze of by-streets, which smelled faintly of insense from the churches, they made their way onto the Yauza boulevard and climbed up to Pushkin Square. Petrov always regarded this route as an "ascent", although in fact it was a descent.

But for any true Muscovite the road to the Pushkin monument could only be an ascent. And when they reached Tanya's house at the beginning of Bolshaya Bronnaya Street, it seemed to him that he had learned a great deal about his companion, although their occasional remarks had concerned only the surroundings of their long walk. Not entirely, though. It had also come out that the aunt with whom she lived was called "Aunt Dovey."

At the staircase entrance the demon of eloquence again overcame him. Perhaps he was afraid that it was all over and he would again be left to himself. He said it would be nice to get a few people together and spend the evening talking, perhaps with a bottle or two of wine. They could have music, and a dance and it would be just like before the war. What on earth made him talk like this? He could never have held such a party. He had nowhere to hold it and nothing to hold it with. At home his mother was not well, and a bottle of vodka cost five hundred roubles on the black market. He didn't even have any music, or friends either. The only truth in all this drivel was the fact that he wanted to see Tanya again.

"Would it be all right in a week's time?" Tanya asked suddenly.

"Yes, it would," he said confusedly. "But where?"

"We'll find a place. Can you manage eight o'clock in the evening?"

"Any time you like! I'm doing nothing at all. But why so late?"

"That'll be best," Tanya smiled. "Be here at twenty hundred hours."

He laughed at her military manner and saluted, and it was only as he was walking home that he realised how much strain he had put on his wounded foot.

...At the Tishinsky market, Petrov converted his individually styled military cap into a small bottle of wine. At the appointed time he appeared in front of Tanya's entrance. She was waiting for him already with two string-bags in her hands.

And this was where his memory went astray. When anybody meant something to Petrov, he became very strongly aware of that person's presence. It was almost like hypnosis, like loss of one's own personality. If he had been with somebody else, he would probably have remembered the straightforward route from Bolshaya Bronnaya to the back street behind the Conservatoire. But Tanya's slim figure seemed to overshadow his surroundings. Besides they did not take the direct route. They turned off in the direction of the Patriarch's Ponds and at a street corner picked up Tanya's friend Inessa, a big girl with an evasive look in her eyes. Petrov did not realise at first that it was a squint. It was camouflaged by the dark braid of hair that half covered her face. But this did not help much. The one exposed eye did enough squinting

for two. It would fly up to her forehead or dart towards her nose or almost disappear, leaving the big gleaming bluish white starkly visible. When he did notice it, Inessa's squint took possession of him. For him Tanya existed in a kind of vacuum. The few facts she had told him indicated only a loneliness that he could have assumed already. And here was the first material and animated companion of Tanya's life, one who, in addition, was so deliberately and distinctly marked out from all others and possibly a party to all her secrets. But this idea he rejected at once. It was quite obvious that Inessa knew nothing about him. For her he was that amorphous thing that is usually called "a friend of mine" or "a boy". Embarrassed by his lack of substance, he hastened to provide Inessa with some brief information about himself. Inessa in her turn informed him that she was teaching the violin at a music school. Petrov discovered to his confusion that he could have done perfectly well without this exchange, which had revealed nothing of the other's inner self. How quickly he had forgotten the lesson of a little while ago!

His futile chatting with Inessa occupied him to such a degree that he failed to notice how they reached a narrow back-street with its clean, smooth carpet of snow. Snow glistened in the moonlight, dark branches of trees reached out over railings and big snowflakes floated down in the light of the blue

bulbs over the house numbers. For some reason he had to break the blessed evening stillness of this snowed-up urban ravine with an unnecessary question, "Where are we going?"

"You'll find out," Tanya said.

"To Igor's," Inessa announced, as unable to keep quiet as he. "He's wonderful! He's at the Power Engineering Institute, in his fourth year."

But suppose Igor had been at another institute and in another year, what difference would it have made? Would Petrov have turned round and walked home? The "wonderful" was equally irrelevant. People always see each other differently. Petrov glanced with respect at Tanya. It took some courage to live as she did, in silence, not replacing or prefacing emotion with words, not trying to use them to hide or protect herself from life. He had come from an environment where too much importance was attached to words. It had been easier to win affection from Nina by catching her in some verbal trap than by directness of feeling.

They slowly mounted a steep, very dark staircase and he was afraid of falling over with the string-bags on the slippery, battered steps. It surprised him that the climb was so long—the house had looked like a two-storey one from outside. Eventually they stopped and groped for the bell over an oilcloth-covered door studded with brass nail-tops, then over the heavy grooved doorpost and the rough,

frosty wall. Finally his finger made contact with a round bell-push and a pitiful jingle sounded somewhere far away in the depths of this strange dwelling. A vertical slit of light expanded into golden gates and a friendly voice said, "Come in!" Petrov could not immediately make out the face because he was dazzled by the transition from pitch darkness to light. There was the usual confusion in the hall—someone had lost the tab on her coat, what were they to do with the string-bags?—and then they made their somewhat awkward entry into a room with a big orange lampshade and a well-heated Dutch stove, into a warm and cosy recess of human existence, deceptively isolated from the big and dangerous world.

"My den," Igor said with a smile.

He was a little over middle height, stockily built, with regular unimpressive features and plastic movements. It was pleasant to watch him laying the table, an occupation which their arrival had interrupted. Inessa started helping him at once. In her bay-coloured woollen dress that fitted tightly over her massive buttocks and sturdy legs she suggested the thought that centaurs were not necessarily of the male sex.

The restlessness of her face was woefully at odds with the harmony of her mighty frame. The grey-blue eye scampered about in its socket, endowing its owner now with guile, now with a gay audacity, now with

sorrowful resentment. He had to keep himself from responding to every involuntary change of expression in Inessa's face.

"Inessa is a great girl!" Igor whispered confidingly when she went into the kitchen, where Tanya was busy preparing supper.

"She certainly is," Petrov confirmed.

"Pity she doesn't want to have her eyes done!" Igor said with a sigh.

"Why not?"

"She's afraid it'll affect her ear. It's her ear that earns her keeps."

"What's the connection?"

"I don't think there is any. But try to persuade her!"

They asked Petrov to uncork the bottles, after which he was released from any further duties. He was surprised that there was so much food on the table: smoked sausage, ham, gruyère cheese, a tin of sardines—he had forgotten that such things existed. Ever since the day war broke out Nina's family had been cooking on castor oil, although their cupboards were packed with provisions. He and his mother lived on her ration card because he still hadn't managed to obtain an army one.

"When and where is all this happening?" Petrov asked. "Perhaps we only dreamed there was a war on and now we have woken up?"

"I don't know myself where the girls got all this grub from," Igor responded.

"Give it ten bars rest!" Inessa said in her own musical language.

Igor put on a record.

In the silent solitude of night
Remember me...

Keto Japaridze's sobbing voice implored. Petrov stared at the tip of his cigarette. He was back in the days before the war and he still knew nothing at all about himself. He did not know that he would let an enemy soldier get away when he met him face-to-face, that he would let the woman he loved get away without meeting her face-to-face; he did not know that happiness was not something we are entitled to from birth. And there was much else that he didn't know and was only now beginning to guess at.

If ever you and I should part,
Remember me.
If some other love should win your heart,
Remember me.

How awful if it was really like that, he thought in response to the singer's words. What happiness could there be with someone else if you were always remembering your former love. And what kind of condition was it anyway—being happy?

Now it seemed to him that he had always

been happy with Nina. But had he ever been aware of that happiness as he now was of unhappiness—every hour, every minute? Of course not! There had been the happiness of intimacy, and the rest of the time he had been inwardly free to experience any feelings the fullness of life might bring: anger, grief, hatred, even falling in love. One is aware of unhappiness all the time, but happiness, when it does come, is forgotten. But enough of this mawkishness! If he had failed to fight for this woman, he would fight against her, especially as he now had such a powerful ally as Tanya, who had dropped from heaven at the right place and the right time.

He could remember nothing of that long sitting at table with its unusually tasty food, its talk and toasts. He remembered feeling a little drunk and trying to express his gratitude to Tanya, and how she had said, very seriously.

"No, don't. Please don't."

"But I want you to realise just how much..."

"Please! Please don't!" Tanya said.

But he was so sure that he did not deserve smoked sausage, gruyère cheese, the warmth of the Dutch stove and such kind attention, that he would probably have ignored this warning if Inessa had not begun to sing in her nasal but perfectly intonated voice, accompanying herself on an old piano.

There lived two friends, two friends together
And all they had they shared together,
Both were young, and both named Petya,
Tara-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra!..

Inessa knew lots of comic songs and delicious romances. There is nothing better, when there must be at least a few moments of forgetfulness and Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms are not the thing. This is when Oginsky's *Polonaise* rules supreme, and the Gypsy songs and "cruel" romances fill in the gaps.

Life has many meetings,
But love comes only once.
And on that distant evening
Madly, madly did I love you...

Inessa threw her head back as she sang, and her face with closed eyes had a statuesque beauty.

"Ah, if Inessa would only have her tonsils out, how she would sing then!" Igor whispered rapturously.

"Why doesn't she?"

"She's afraid it'll affect her ear."

Petrov realised he had heard something like this before and refrained from asking what the connection was between hearing and tonsils.

...Petrov was surprised that his appearance in this friendly company had aroused no

curiosity. Neither Inessa nor Igor asked him any questions or watched him, as would have been quite natural, to find out just what kind of relations he had with Tanya. He had just come back from the war, but they didn't even ask about that either. Only Igor mentioned in passing that he would have to go for another medical examination soon. Petrov guessed that the tactfulness of his new acquaintances was backed by a stern command to leave him in peace. He could even hear the intonation in which Tanya had given that order to her friends, quiet and a little hoarse when she was whispering, silvery clear when she wished to stress something. Big and full of sound though she was, Inessa obeyed her fragile friend and it was a joyful obedience. One could feel that at once without any obvious proof. It was the kind of obedience evoked not by strength, not by a more active, purposeful character, but by a high-ranking generosity of soul. But although orders were orders, Tanya would still have to explain something about him to her friends. Or rather, she would have to define her attitude to him. His being crippled in the war and his failure in his private life were enough to justify sympathy. And out of respect for Tanya's compassion they treated him carefully, as if he were sick. This was a little sad, a little boring and a little unpleasant. But no more of that! Tanya could do nothing that was really unpleasant, or that would humiliate him. Of course, she might have told

her friends not to trouble him, to let him have a peaceful evening, and that would be all—she had never liked wordy explanations. And where did the pity come in? She had once helped him to swim ashore, but rescuing the drowning was not her profession. Now she was again offering him help in his distress; but she was not just a nurse. Her slim body was full of strength and grace, it was the epitome of directness and daring. Then what did all this mean? There must have been a puzzled expression on his face because Tanya asked through Inessa's resounding fortissimo, "Are you bored?"

"No. What makes you think that?"

"Is something annoying you?"

"How could you think so! If anything annoys me, it is myself."

"I can see you are sad," she said regretfully.

"Not a bit! I had forgotten that anything could be so good as this! It's just that I'm quarrelling with myself all the time. But never mind, I'll make it up."

"That may be harder than making it up with another person," Tanya said.

They drank their last toast to what was going on in the outside world. Inessa said in her strong nasal voice, "Well, here's to victory! And as soon as possible!" And with only a tiny sliver of the pupil visible in her eye, she held out her glass to Petrov.

They all drank to the last drop.

Petrov decided that he ought to be going,

but it was a quarter past one and there was a curfew in Moscow.

"You boys go to bed, and we'll follow," Inessa said, and carried a tray of dirty plates out into the kitchen.

There was bedding on the wide settee and on the floor beside the stove. Between them was the dining table.

"Where do you want to sleep?" Igor asked.

"On the floor, of course."

"Army style, eh?" Igor said joyfully and, having undressed at lightning speed, hopped under the blanket on the settee.

Inessa came in from the kitchen, sat down on the edge of the settee and began slowly unbuttoning her dress. Igor stretched his bare arm out from under the blanket and turned the light-switch. Now the only gleam of light in the room was from the kitchen, where Tanya was still busy. Petrov went round the table, undressed and lay down. The springs of the old settee groaned suddenly under the weight of a heavy body and there was some muttering, rather like the cooing of doves, but more quarrelsome than lyrical! The sound lulled him into a doze and when he came to himself again Tanya was lying beside him. He woke up with a sense of cool and freshness, as if he had been carried into some dewy grass. Those softly lashed eyes glowed in the darkness. He touched her hair and she cleaved to him at once with her light slender body.

"Who do you belong to, Tanya?" Petrov

asked, embarrassed by the loud thumping of his heart.

"To no one."

"Nor do I, but I haven't got used to it yet."

"You belong to me," Tanya said. She put her arms round him and drew him upon herself, lifting her head off the pillow and kissing him with her strong and tender mouth.

All of a sudden he drew back and almost tore himself free.

"No," he said, "we can't do this."

She would not let him go and she had strong arms, a strong mouth and a strong body. Where did it come from in such frailty? They almost wrestled.

"No, Tanya," Petrov said. "We may one day, but not now, not like this."

But she would not let go. "I want it now..."

"No," he said. "It would make me a thief."

"Why do you say that? It is my choice..."

"When the night is over, I shall go away, on a long journey!"

She kissed him in a different way.

With gratitude, perhaps?

"I still won't let you go."

"But I am making you suffer."

"No, you are not. And now be quiet."

He felt her tears on his face. She was weeping silently, with only her eyes. But the trap of her arms did not open and he felt his blood rising in every tiny blood vessel, every nerve. In that instant he discovered how little we are aware of our bodies, we take in

perhaps only a hundredth part of what our senses could perceive.

Then it was morning and he had the feeling even in the dimness of awakening that she was not there, not in the room, not in the flat. The spirit had gone and there were only bare walls left. And so it was. She had put away everything that could be put away without disturbing his sleep: her pillow, the pile of oddments that had served as a mattress, the greatcoat that had been their extra blanket. She used no cosmetics and his skin retained not even a faint aroma. She had completely freed him of herself, so that he should not feel any obligation or regret, not a trace of those burdens with which we so easily reward each other for even a small intimacy. She had left him free and unburdened—it was the highest gift she could make.

He got up and went to the bathroom. The shower was not working and a half-naked Igor was grunting and splashing himself with cold water over the basin.

"Well, what's the score?" he asked, slapping his chest and shoulders.

"What score?" Petrov didn't get it at once and, when he did, he became somehow powerlessly angry. "Are you mad? We're not on those terms at all." And to put a stop to any further questions he congratulated Igor on having had a wonderful night.

"It was no go," Igor sighed despondently.

"I thought she was a good friend of yours."

"It's love in the babies' class. She's afraid it might affect her ear." He let Petrov go to the basin and began rubbing himself down with a grey cotton towel.

"I don't like all this," he grumbled with the sour, dissatisfied air of a man who has slept too little and been thwarted in love.

"All what?"

"Where did they find all this grub and drink? You can't get it on your ration card or buy it at the market."

"What are you driving at?" Petrov turned his wet face on him.

"Nothing in particular," Igor said with a frown. "But I, for one, couldn't get sardines to save my life. Of course, I haven't got the kind of legs that Tanya has."

The really infuriating suspicion is the one that contains a grain of truth. But Petrov knew something that Igor did not, and the wish to murder passed as soon as it arose. He said mockingly, "So that's why you were off your food last night! I noticed you could hardly eat or drink!"

Igor had a rather keen sense of approaching danger. He said nothing and withdrew. A few minutes later, when Petrov came out of the bathroom, he was nowhere to be seen. Inessa, big and sad, poured out a glass of stale tea for Petrov and offered him a plate of dry cheese. She really did have a wonderful ear. Even through the thick wall and with water flowing

from the tap she had heard their conversation.

"It was a good thing you didn't hit him," she said. "Tanya wouldn't have liked it. He's not a bad boy—compared to the rest that are still going. But he's not very bright, you know the sort? Tanya got all that stuff on her blood donor's card. Last week she gave blood twice."

"But is that allowed?" When we are badly shaken, we clutch at any straw.

"Anything is, if you want it to be."

So they had been drinking Tanya's blood, and eating it too, that scarlet blood from the tiny vessels and the tiny heart he had heard beating in the night. He suddenly realised that the soul has the form of the body. He felt a tightness not in his physical throat but in the throat of his soul.

"Yes," he said. A quotation came to his mind—I ask not the cost of thy annointing. But he ought to have asked! In wartime too much is bought at the cost of blood.

"But don't give me away," Inessa begged almost piteously. "Or it'll be all up with me, I'd go under without Tanya." And in reply to Petrov's surprised look, "I have nobody. My father was killed, my mother is worse than a child and there are two small sisters to look after. The whole bunch depends on my hearing. Of course, I'm afraid of spoiling it. I'm afraid of spoiling any part of me because I have three dependants. So Igor needn't try to make me out a fool. But

Tanya's a brick!" And to prevent any further questions, she added, "But you have to talk about Tanya with Tanya herself. I've told you too much already. That idiot set me off with his meanness. Well, it's time to go. Perhaps we'll meet again sometime..."

But they never did.

The unlucky in life, the failures, and even those who are not sure of themselves radiate some mournful light that allows the mighty of this world to reject them out of hand. They may not even have opened their mouths, they still have the gloss of a painful preparation, the cheerfulness, the smartness, the direct glance and politely confident smile they have mastered specially for the occasion, but the man behind the big table knows that all this is deception and the person before him is a lame duck. The invisible signals have told their story and the cold refusal is already written in the man's mind. Petrov had had many such an interview. But after the night with Tanya he found his place in life, without even entering the holy of holies. He managed it in the passage of the Army Political Department.

He got talking to a Brigade Commissar in a splendid greatcoat with an astrakhan collar and a tall astrakhan hat, stylishly cocked on his big handsome head. He turned out to be the chief of the agitation and propaganda section of the political department of one of the Northern fronts. Nearly all the army, and

particularly the higher ranks, were now wearing pips on their shoulder-straps, but this Brigade Commissar displayed a touching loyalty to the old badges of rank. He was not likely to get his major generalship, and he did not like going back to the rank of colonel. So now he was "using up" old insignia. Out of a similar sense of being hard done by he liked playing the role of Harun al-Rashid. On hearing Petrov's case, he smacked his forehead, "Our front newspaper has been looking for someone who can write. I'll take you." Having spotted the Brigade Commissar's weakness, Petrov displayed a tactful disbelief in the possibility of such a miracle—he did everything now with an easy assurance—and by evening he already had his marching orders in his pocket. "To proceed to such and such destination." The Brigade Commissar said he would take him along. He would be returning to the front in the staff car at the head of a column of special vehicles: a radio unit and two mobile print-shops. They were to leave the day after tomorrow at dawn.

On the eve of his departure Petrov dashed round to see Tanya, finding her flat with some difficulty. The door was opened to him by an old-looking, though probably not really old, lady in a blouse with an enamel broach, a sleeveless army jacket, a pleated skirt and felt boots.

"May I speak to Tanya?"

"Tanya?" she stared over his shoulder

disapprovingly, as if something even nastier stood behind him.

"Yes, Tanya, the student." He suddenly discovered that he did not know Tanya's second name. "My name is Petrov."

"Take yourself off, Ivan Petrov!" said the woman and cackled loudly.

There was something likable about her despite her quaintness and incivility. This must be Aunty Dovey! At this point he realised that the restrained Tanya had probably not told her aunt of his existence.

"Excuse me, but are you Aunty Dovey?"

"Well, suppose I am?" she frowned.

"Would you, please, tell Tanya that Petrov called to see her. Or perhaps I had better write a note, if you don't mind."

Aunty Dovey did not let him into the flat and he wrote the short note on a scrap of paper, propping it on his officer's field case. He realised that Aunty Dovey would be sure to read the note, so he made it short. "Tanya, I am going off to join a front-line newspaper. Thank you for everything. You pulled me out of the water once again." The crinkly artificial leather of the case made his writing rather wobbly. Aunty Dovey took the note with obvious reluctance and doubt, but also with a secret curiosity. And that was all.

"Goodbye, Aunty Dovey!"

"Take yourself off, Ivan Petrov!" she said, cackling again.

When he revisited the house a few years later, it was a building site. A large residential block was going up and, along with it, the Lyra café.

How had it all happened? Now, as he sat at the wheel of his landrover, the fifty-two-year-old Petrov could not understand how he had let that warm trusting life slip through his fingers. And yet it would have been far more unnatural if their meeting had grown into something bigger. After all, he had loved Nina, not Tanya. He had loved and hated Nina and thought of her all the time and he had only remembered Tanya with a certain tenderness and surprise, like something in a dream. Later on he began to think that he had simply invented this strange, unexpected, poignantly sweet and sad meeting on the basis of some crude and trivial wartime reality.

While he did his boring, unheroic army job—endless correcting of other people's manuscripts in the cramped compartment of a railway carriage where his editorial office and front-line print-shop were located, he was taken up with only one thought, that of getting back to the war. Nothing came of it. Because of his foot the medical board insisted that he was a non-combatant. He managed to get on a few reporting trips to the front line only at the very end of the war. The paper needed a qualified editor more than a gatherer of front-line news. He had to play

the part of night-editor, proof-reader, and manager. These were the machine-gun embrasures that he had to block with his own body. To each his own.

He was demobilised as soon as the war was over and returned to the institute. He had forgotten everything so completely that he joined the second-year course instead of the third. The difficult business of getting down to study again, his mother's illness and death, the hardships he had to put up with as a student in contrast to the well-fed security of army life, the practical work, the trips to collective farms for potato-digging, the library, the exams and constant efforts to earn a little on the side, and, despite all the difficulties, the splendid college life that never gave you a minute to look round, helped to heal the wounds and dull his memories, even the dearest of them.

Had he really forgotten all about Tanya and never even wanted to see her again? No, the desire had arisen more than once, and sometimes even caught at his throat... But how could he go to see her as a half-starved student, by no means young, and with nothing but an old army tunic to wear? Never! When they met for the third time he believed in the magic of figures—he would appear before her on the milk-white steed of success. But the road to success is long and the cost, high. Halfway through life's journey, when personality finally takes shape and its

ultimate destiny is decided, a person tends to harden and cast aside all that is weakening and may divert him from his chosen goal—granted he has a goal. He retreats far away from childhood and youth, from the springs of kindness that nourished him before. And this was the point when Petrov started thinking of Tanya as an invented memory.

Later on, when you begin to gather up the threads of time, the past acquires a new value; feeling yourself at last firmly enough established in the here and now, you want to draw up some support from the past. A re-evaluation takes place and everything is restored to its proper status. "All that I most dearly and deservedly did love!" Yes, that was when he had gone rushing off to Bolshaya Bronnaya Street. The sense of success that he desired so much was perhaps lacking, although some success there had been. Anyway he was not on his beam ends, not a drowning man clutching at that thin strong arm for salvation. Or was he?.. He had never managed to sort that out. Instead of the old house there were tall cranes with aircraft-like lights winking overhead as they built up the new walls. He came to the ashes of his wartime youth and with a passing sigh of regret rushed on into life's continuation.

Here he found time for everything, for hours of billiards in a stuffy basement that reeked of tobacco smoke, beer, dust and male sweat, for sitting with a roaring crowd at foot-

ball matches, for attending concerts and exhibitions just because everyone else did, and at the same time for writing, for writing with real zest, for making interesting and arduous journeys, for shooting and fishing, for playing with his daughter and thinking things over with his son, for meeting splendid people and fine women, for nourishing his soul with great poetry, not merely loving literature and art, but having there some eternal companions, for marvelling at the dawn and sunset, the star-studded sky and the inexhaustible resources of humanity in man. The only thing he did not have time for was to trace Tanya by the still warm tracks that led from her house. After all, some of the people who had pulled down that house must have known what had happened to its former inhabitants. Hadn't he even wanted to see Tanya, if only out of pure curiosity, out of a sense of gratitude?

He was faintly aware of the artificiality of such thoughts. He could never have been merely curious about Tanya. It was not gratitude that possessed him even now. He remembered the weightlessness of her head, the lightness and firmness of her long body, the tenderness of her breath playing on his cheek, the soft patter of her blood-drained heart and those fluffy eyes, softly radiant in the darkness. There had been nothing better than this in his life. Comparison was futile. There simply had been nothing else except this, and

he had thrown away the one thing that was of value without even a backward glance. It was this despair that had made him start looking for Tanya, and it had taken time to ripen.

The search had begun with failure. He had not even found the street and he had yet to recognise the house and to find Igor still living there. Had Igor ever tamed his timid and rebellious centaur? Petrov knew that it would be no use looking for Tanya with the help of vague but, of course, existing administrative means as, for instance, old house registers that were no doubt preserved in some musty cellars. The finest creations of mankind: pictures, sculptures, splendid buildings and, most easily of all, of course, books, whole libraries of them, disappear forever, but the everyday rubbish of the archive files survives all these cataclysms. Suppose he was lucky and received from the icy fingers of some underground gnome the necessary information—where the tenants of the house in Bolshaya Bronnaya had been moved to. It would be easier to follow the trail from there, but what kind of Tanya would he find at the end of his long quest for information? Red tape could not create a miracle. He must find her just as he had done on that distant February day, when she had flown down like a sparrow out of the frosty blue air. He had been in a bad way then and she had appeared. Now he was in a bad way again, a different way perhaps but it gave a hope that she might

respond. It was a pity they had so little time left to them. Tanya would also be old, she would be nearly fifty, and that was no Indian summer but the deepest autumn. God Almighty, where had all the time gone?..

Day after day now he roamed along the crooked, mysterious streets at the back of the Conservatoire. He went on foot now. It was no use hoping to see a ghost out of a car window.

And at last he found his back street among all those grey, similarly twisting and secretive streets that criss-crossed at the back of Herzen Street. And in this particular lane his eye rested upon an old yellow house with an attic floor and a deep archway that was so crooked you couldn't see the other end of it. But something stopped him from going up the narrow staircase that he had spotted through the only entrance door. Either it was uncertainty about his selection or else he felt the lack of some encouraging sign. Or perhaps he was just afraid of making a mistake, of disappointment? He decided not to hasten events.

And all the while he felt a strange youthful buoyancy that left him only during his nightly insomnia, the like of which he had not known since he was in hospital. But then it had been pain which kept him awake, and now there seemed to be no real reason. He went to bed with a joyful expectation of the following morning when he would again begin

to live, work, and think of Tanya, of how on that day the back lane might reveal to him its simple secret. After all, even a small green wicket-gate, hidden in a wall, had revealed itself to the dedicated and persistent searcher, and here there was a whole house, even if it was not a very big one by modern standards. He would begin to doze off on the waves of fantasy, when suddenly a rough hand would take him by the scruff of the neck and toss him back into aimless reality. Through those empty nocturnal hours he could neither think, nor remember, nor love. There was no heart in him, yet all the same he went on living, as if by inertia, and then, realising that he still had some momentum left, he would calm down and fall asleep to wake up in the morning, happy once again.

The day came when he abandoned caution and with his great secret that must have seemed absurd to any normal outside consciousness, was suddenly brought down to earth. A man with a woman's fur jacket over his nightshirt popped out of the archway of this house of his desire and accosted him. "What are you after round here?"

And now he was in trouble again. Then it had been a militiaman, and now it was this vigilante! How strict the discipline of reality to which our life is subject if even harmless attempts to penetrate the frontiers of the past encounter such unrelenting resistance. "What business is it of yours?" Petrov said,

well aware that the unsleeping eye of the philistine has business with everything. The man in the woman's jacket was, at this moment, the epitome of a true citizen's greatest quality—vigilance. And this man had, of course, noticed him some time ago. "You've been snooping around here every day..." But was this a prohibited zone? Was not the street as much his as anybody else's? Petrov expressed these and other arguments, knowing perfectly well how futile they were.

"Come on, show us your papers!"

Although this was said in a normal, perhaps even subdued, businesslike tone, the magic word thundered down the street and instantly gathered a crowd around them.

"Why are you bothering me?" Petrov said, noting his adversary's wiry, muscular figure.

"Show us your papers."

"Why should I? Who are you anyway?"

He ought not to have said that. Couldn't he see that the busybody's confidence had sufficiently substantial grounds to cause him quite a lot of trouble. The busybody immediately produced from his trouser pocket an official-looking card. He had not even put on his hat and was wearing his wife's jacket instead of his own, but he had remembered to take with him the evidence of his authority. "Tanya, Tanya, why hast thou forsaken me!" Petrov was still trying to maintain a modicum of dignity, but the people around him were not inclined to silence. A woman

loudly proclaimed that she had seen him here before, another recalled the mysterious murderer Ionesyan, and someone proposed sending for a militiaman. That it should come to this after such a beginning, Petrov thought sadly, staring around at the strangely distorted faces of his quiet fellow-citizens.

"I can't understand what all the fuss is about! I'm looking for a house that I visited once during the war. A friend of mine used to live there."

"Never mind that, show us your papers!"

A suffocating sense of horror suddenly overcame him. He had to get away, get away as soon as possible from this tight enclosure of suspicion and malice.

"Here you are, then," he held out his passport to the busybody. "And this is my pass to the House of Scientists," he added, giving in completely to the victor's mercy.

Everyone tried to have a look at the passport which the guardian of public order clumsily but carefully studied. And all of a sudden a boy with a pair of skates under his arm asked: "Wasn't it you who wrote the book about Schliemann?"

"Yes, it was," Petrov said.

"And the one called *Tutankhamen's Treasures* as well?"

"Yes."

The boy gave a long whistle.

"What are you writing now?"

The busybody in the woman's jacket was

clever enough to re-assess the situation. He had probably never read any of these books but he had no further questions.

"Much obliged, Comrade Petrov," he said, returning the passport (he had ignored the pass to the House of Scientists). "This is all in order. Can I be of any help?" He said it as if Petrov had been appealing for his assistance.

Petrov knew that none of this would get him anywhere, and he did not want any help from anyone, but he did mention Igor and described his general appearance. With the same eagerness that they had evinced in their desire to lynch the stranger a few moments ago the crowd tried now to help him. After a silly hubbub it turned out that no one in the crowd had ever lived here during the war and could not possibly have known Igor. But everyone had some valuable advice to offer about how to pursue the search. He was then honourably released and the inquisitive lad with the skates actually saw him as far as the bus-stop.

Petrov did not make any further expeditions to the by-streets behind the Conservatoire and the spell of Tanya left him for a while. When it returned it was in the form of a deep and hopeless anguish.

One day, at odds with himself, he decided to talk to his wife. She was guarded in her reception. Already regretting his weakness, he tried to tell her about the strange power that this memory had over him.

"What's come over me? Is this some turning-point? Is it old age, or perhaps second youth?"

"It's your arteries, of course," his wife said with conviction. "How long is it since you checked up on your blood pressure?"

"Don't tell me that! I want to know what I ought to do."

"Go and see a good doctor. And stop smoking at once."

He closed the door quietly behind him. The attempt to unburden his soul had not been a success. He went back to his dark study, switched on the light and switched it off again to look at the starry sky outside his windows. It was good to live on the ninth floor, on the very edge of town. Tsaritsino and the dark ruins of the Bazhenov-built palace in its dark ring of trees lay below him. The minor inconveniences of distance were amply compensated for by the possibility of seeing the sky with all its lights and that one special scintillating star that was looking down at him through the window now. The star with its little fibres of radiant light was as fluffy as Tanya's eyes.

I must look for her, Petrov thought to himself, but not as I have been doing up to now. Such searching is foolish and absurd. The old Tanya no longer exists and the one that does exist has no need of me. He checked this train of thought. All the same, if he did one day meet a worn, tired, no longer young and beau-

tiful woman that was the former Tanya, he would have thrown himself and his greying head at her knees and that would have been all he wanted. But now he must search for her without any hope of succeeding. He must search for her in others, in his gloomy, splendid son, in his daughter who was just making the difficult passage to womanhood. My wife may be a stranger to me, yet I won't deny her a certain insight; I've got to search in everyone I meet and in myself, particularly in myself, for that light which makes life precious. I am no longer afraid of old age—let it come if it has not come already, I am willing to act in accordance with its goals and dignity. I know now that old age is not the stopping place, not the beginning of the end, but a new stage of the rocket that is still soaring into the unknown. Yes, soaring towards that fluffy little star...

He lived a few more wonderful and exciting days, staring eagerly into human faces. It mattered little that he read in them, for the most part, only indifference, anxiety, and a sullen alienation, but sometimes there was inspiration which remained a mystery to him. He knew that he must be patient and the miracle would come.

It did come, earlier than he had expected. One night, when he had been unable to get to sleep for a long time, he became not exactly alarmed but rather puzzled by the chaos in his chest, where his heart was thumping

irregularly and deafeningly now in his shoulder, now at his throat, now at his temple—how could anyone sleep with such a row going on!—or else fading away and almost stopping—just try to sleep in such a menacing silence! In the exhausting and stupefying reality to which he returned he felt beside him a long cool body and a light tender head resting in the crook of his arm, and without surprise and with instant readiness for happiness he realised that Tanya had come at last. He accepted the fact that the penalty he would have to pay for this was a splitting pain at the back of his head and such a constriction of the chest that he almost let go of Tanya. But he managed to hold on to her and held her until the last moment of the life that had left him so simply.

Heart and brain gave out at the same time. His wife had been right, but her good advice had come too late. The post mortem showed that the blood vessels were quite worn out and the heart so clogged up that it had become as brittle as glass.

His son, who had fought heroically with his tears and almost succeeded in overcoming them, and, in doing so, acquired a sense of superiority over his mother and sister, heard this colourful phrase and said almost proudly, "A glass heart?.. Why, did it ring?"

"Yes, it did," his mother responded with a distant smile. "But we never heard it."

THE HUSHED SPRING

It was a strange spring—Sergeyev did not hear it. It was the first silent spring in his life. No, he had not gone stone deaf: from his suburban house he could hear perfectly well the increasing roar of planes taking off from Vnukovo Airport, and the quiet drone of planes from Domodedovo and Bikovo airports, which were already flying high up, the frightening blasts test jets made passing through the sound barrier, the pleasant bee-like buzzing of the old propeller planes patrolling the highway, and the dragonfly-like whirring of the agricultural planes spraying the orchards, vegetable plots, roofs and paths with off-white slime. And he could also hear the cars, motorbikes, tractors and radio loudspeakers in the nearby holiday house, playing four popular tunes over and over again, and later on the hearty commands of the P. T. coach in the Young Pioneers' Camp making half-

asleep children with sticky eyelids jump up and down on the cold dewy sports ground. However, it was as though we had slipped straight into summer for, you see, the Young Pioneers' camps began in June, and spring seemed to have slipped into summer too: the bird-cherry trees began to shed their fluff in mid-June just as the dandelions started flying through the air, and the lilies-of-the-valley and buttercups bloomed almost at the same time as the lilac bluebells and pink hyacinths. But even a delayed spring ought not to be silent. Sergeyev's spring, however, except for the crude sounds, partly created by the spring but not really a true expression of it, remained dumb and silent. The voice of youthful spring—the sound of melting snow, and the voice of mature spring—birds—those are what Sergeyev did not hear.

To start with, he thought that the birds must have put off their arrival, just as the trees and plants had their blossoming, until it grew warmer. But then he spotted some rooks which had not yet had time to dirty their bright yellow claws, and later, some starlings tidying their nests after the messy squirrels which had spent the winter in them, and then a chiff-chaff swaying on a dry thistle stem, and swallows in the sky: the birds had long since come back from their winter resorts to settle down to the serious business of having a family but for some reason they were keeping silent and not paying tribute

to the spring or singing love songs.

At first he thought that the strange hush had spread only over his garden but after the weather had improved and it had dried up a little, he went for a walk in the woods and did not hear anything there either. Blackbirds kept flying across the clearings but not once was the dense silence broken by their piercing cries; silent, too, were the siskins and goldfinches; not a peep came from the redpoll; the landrail did not clear its throat before singing a song which never began; the male cuckoo did not sing its triumphant song. Gone, too, were the mysterious voices which towards evening issued forth from the misty woods and pungent-smelling gullies, and in a glade on the edge of the woods a black and white lapwing flitted from wing to wing over the emerald green canopy, and then ran in zigzags without cheeping in its usual delicate way. Even the woodpeckers somehow managed to tap the bark of trunks soundlessly. And the magpies, bustling around their nests, went through the ritual of panicking slightly at the sight of a stranger without a squawk. Only the crows, swooping down from a great height on the intruder, rent the air with rusty cries from their throats of cast iron. But what sort of spring it was if the only sounds came from crows! Even crows, mind you, make a glorious sound: in autumn when other birds are flocking together to migrate to warm climes, and the crows are rallying to

fly a short distance south, their farewell craws are most mournful.

But how the pastel-shaded woods, groves and clearings along the banks of the Diesna near Moscow used simply to ring with the sounds of the spring songsters! The nightingales would trill from the translucent pink late afternoon until well into the night, and from the misty hour before dawn until the sun was high in the sky. There used to be more nightingales here than anywhere else in all the Moscow region. They used to sing at the edges of the woods, the old groves left from landowners' estates, the birch and aspen thickets, the alder groves along the lanes and main road, in the lilac and jasmin gardens, in the village cemetery where the dark old crosses were interspersed with white socles bearing small red stars over the war veterans' graves. How fearless the nightingales were! There were lots of dogs and cats in Sergeyev's village, and even an inquisitive meddlesome monkey and a great many children running wild, so the nightingales ought to have been on their guard but instead they trilled and vied with one another to see who could sing the best.

Why had the birds stopped singing? In all the years Sergeyev had lived on the Diesna all kinds of wonders, great and small, had happened. In the memorable summer when the parched earth, roasted by the merciless sun, had squeaked underfoot and its rock-

hard surface had been painful to walk on, Sergeyev's favourite woodland path, which had once been rather damp, became cracked like a desert track and strewn with dead frogs which looked as though they had been polished. They had evidently crawled here from the dried-up ponds, streams and marshes recalling the shade and damp the path had once afforded and been shrivelled up by the sun. Then a young elk came galloping out of the wood, shaking its head violently and dropped down dead. It turned out that all its blood had been sucked by mosquitoes and various kinds of woodland gnats.

In that terrible summer the woods and turf marshes blazed around Moscow, and during the day vehicles drove about with their headlights on; failing to penetrate the off-white clouds of smoke, their strong lights flattened out into rainbow-like pancakes. Unaware of the fire, Sergeyev set off on his usual walk across the meadow by Black Stream as this tributary of the Diesna was called on account of the jet-black factory drainage which flowed into it all the year round, and then suddenly he discovered that everything as far as he could see was slowly being enveloped by a milky white and slightly shiny haze. In a matter of minutes the gentle landscape of the Moscow region, for years faithful to the pastel shades of the Peredvizhnik School of painters, acquired the lunar transparency of a Leonardo: everything in it lost its contours, became

diffused, and dissolved in the pale bluish mist; reality became a dream.

Another time he discovered on a village path by a dried-up puddle dissected by a cobweb of myriad of cracks, a dark mound of dead butterflies which were stuck together. Others kept flying onto the mound, plunging their proboscises deep into the pile of lifeless butterflies, folding their wings and expiring.

Once a male cuckoo, the like of which you would never see no matter how hard you looked, quite brazenly landed right in his path on the large shaggy bough of a pine covered with amber trickles of resin, which was the texture of burnt sugar on the ends of the needles, and it puffed out its wings, stuck out its tail and began trilling at the top of its voice. And its becrazed vibrant voice had accompanied him all the way to the edge of the wood.

Another time he disturbed a magpie court passing verdict on a young fox which had obviously just raided a nest: taking advantage of the raucous judges' confusion, the young fox ran off leaving a tuft of red fur on the grass. And then Sergeyev had to concern himself with his own safety. Clouds of minute bottle-green gnats attacked him from all directions, plastering him from head to foot and intending to suck all his blood just as the mosquitoes had the young elk's. They got into his eyes, right into his pupils, his mouth and ears, entangling themselves in his hair and

inside his shirt. And there was no way of repulsing this ridiculous and rather horrific attack. Amusement turned to vexation, fury, and then panic—he rushed out of the woods, scratching his legs on the windfallen twigs and branches entangled in the grass, and the gnats pursued him right to the end of the track and then stopped and hung in a glinting and droning small bottle-green cloud.

In a word, all sorts of wonders had happened but never something so sad as a mute spring. In vain Sergeyev strained his ear and hurried into the awakened countryside and ran at sunset towards the shady thick elder grove on the other side of the river where in previous years the liveliest nightingales had sung. The music of the flowering lovesick world had died.

One day his wife said:

"How marvellously that nightingale is singing in the garden next-door! You know, it seems to me that it's our nightingale from last year but for some reason or other we didn't appeal to it and it's changed its place of residence."

"When did you hear it?" Sergeyev asked.

"Why, every evening. Maybe it sings in the mornings too but I get up late."

Unlike his wife Sergeyev got up early. Just after five he went out into the garden. The flowers and leaves and Hungarian lilac bushes were covered in dew, and the awakening world smelt superbly fresh. The silence was

crystal-clear. Then a plane that was going up started rumbling in the direction of Vnukovo Airport. A lorry went roaring past the house, rattling its loose sides. Sergeyev waited but no other sounds belonging to the soft world of nature could be heard. With an ironic smile he thought to himself that the nightingale was having a lie-in like his wife. He went back inside and sat down to work.

He recalled the nightingale when they were drinking tea on the terrace that evening, noticing his wife's intent expression. The nightingale was singing solely for her: Sergeyev could not hear it. Once he thought he heard the sounds "tuc", "tuc", "tuc" but they turned out to be the noise made by an old woman cutting young nettles for a vegetable soup.

"Can you really not hear?" asked his wife.

"No, I can't."

"What's the matter with you?"

"I must be getting old."

"What's old age got to do with it?.. Gran!" called his wife. "Can you hear the nightingale?"

The old woman put her chopping knife aside.

"Oh, the little rogue!" she said warmly. "Just listen to it, the devil!" And then she went back to cutting nettles.

One day, however, Sergeyev heard nearly all the birds which created the spring in the Moscow region; they flew into his garden from the surrounding woods and fields to give

a concert under his windows which he had flung open into the unnatural, startling silence. They sang all at once without getting in each other's way in the least, their strong rich voices fused in a single chorus, each one keeping to its part. How they sang, what beautiful trills they made and what notes they reached!.. Sergeyev waited for the branches of the tree, the fir's pointed crowns, the roofs, eaves and wires to be filled with birds but glancing out the window, he could not spot a single songbird, not even the bluetits which the old woman threw bits of salami to. So stunned was he not to see the birds whose deafening twittering had shattered the hot green sunlit space that he grew frightened. His temples began thudding. He sat down at his table and clamped his hands over his ears: the superb singing grew even louder and more triumphant. It was the blood gushing through his sclerotic veins, struggling to get through, and the world outside remained just as silent. Evidently, he was doomed to enjoy the music he carried within but it, too, had its advantages: his singing blood was oblivious to the seasons.

...The February before Sergeyev had spent in a sanatorium in the Moscow region. A huge, light-coloured brick tower loomed in the middle of a vast plain at the mercy of all the winds roaming through Central Russia. Here one felt the icy breath of the north wind blowing all the way from the Arctic Ocean,

and the warm currents of the burning desert winds, cooled during their long journey here, and the moist salty lash of the west wind from the sea, and the shuddering gusts of the capricious east winds. "There's always a wind in Russia," said one old writer, but one would be equally right to say that it was always rainy or always fine in Russia, for, you see, Russia is not a country but an entire world where there's always everything. However, the old writer's comment acquires topical significance if one reduces boundless Russia to the minute area occupied by the Weeping Birch Sanatorium where the wind was always giving the sanatorium's inmates cause for alarm, anguish, sweet pleasure and doing great damage to their frail nerves. The winds came from the empty spaces, beyond which, one presumed, there lay villages drowning in snowdrifts, and from the birch wind-break which formed a horse-shoe round the sanatorium.

It was mostly on account of these winds that you felt you were living in a charged atmosphere, in tense suspense. For Sergeyev this suspense was relieved by the arrival of four attractive slim members of a family. There was a husband, wife, daughter and granddaughter. The first three looked much younger than their age, and the fourth much older, and it demanded considerable effort to place them in the right order. One had to age the parents and daughter and subtract

quite a number of years from the granddaughter's age to lower her from the rank of a mature young woman to the modest one of a big girl.

The heightened tension in the air helped Sergeyev imagine one other member of the family who was missing (not the daughter's husband—the big girl's father—no, someone else he had in mind); he could see him in the older woman's wounded eyes, in the strange quiver which sometimes distorted her strong kindly mouth, in the wrinkles which suddenly crisscrossed her firm, smooth face which had resisted aging. There is no point exaggerating Sergeyev's keen insight: he saw merely a loss but, of course, could not know that she had lost her son, and quite recently, too, a talented young man who had all the makings of an outstanding scientist, who had been struck down by an agonizing and incurable rare disease.

The family stood firm against the wind, not the piercing but obviously short-lived local wind which at the time of their arrival had sprinkled dry powdery snow onto the sanatorium's northern face, but against the wind of Destiny which was striving with inexhaustible spite to wreck their sail, a black wind which had blinded the father in midlife, deprived the daughter of her hearing in early childhood, and recently struck down the son. Sergeyev did not realize at once that the man's dark eyes which he trained attentively

on the person he was speaking to were blind. Besides, he used to move about with such agility and ease. His wife was his eyes. During their long married life they had worked out such a pattern of behaviour involving the finest gestures, touches, coughs, interjections, which other people never noticed, that the blind man could now interact in the outside world with just as much confidence as someone with normal sight. His movements were never faltering or even unsure; there was nothing hesitant about his gait; he did not hold his head to one side for fear of running into some unexpected obstacle, and he could tell the time by taking his watch with braille numbers out of his trouser pocket, and what's more, he could type fast. However, although he was able to do a great deal, his wife was totally in charge of him.

Sergeyev took even longer to guess about the daughter's deafness, ascribing her strange, toneless, overstressed speech to the vocal qualities of her fairly low voice. In fact, she spoke like this because she could not hear herself, and because she had learned to speak from her vague childhood recollections of the world of sounds and with the help of special teachers and, first and foremost, her parents who guided her through her silent world just as delicately and firmly as the woman's mother led her father through his darkness.

Sergeyev began wondering almost in earnest whether we weren't guests at a deities'

feast after all, as the poet Tiutchev had eloquently described, but victims of some grandiose experiment. And the aim of the ruthless experiment was to determine how significant the human element was in man. If so, the far-off deities would have to take their hats off, or whatever they called the thing they covered the tops of their brilliant awe-inspiring heads with, at the moral strength of this family.

Each family member was totally fulfilling his purpose. The holder of all manner of awards and titles, the father created amazing mathematical equations, equally capable of rearranging the universe in a better way and of totally destroying it. But do scientists, who love and enjoy life just as much as anyone else and are constantly making new discoveries, really think of the destructive nature of their creations? Or are they purely interested in mental processes, and are their intentions only good? The blind mathematician was obviously most fond of all living things, and spent his free time inventing car engines which would ozonize the air instead of polluting it, and aircraft engines emitting sounds like Vivaldi violin pieces and Mozart's harpsicord concertos instead of making a hellish din.

The daughter, a Doctor of Sciences, defended her scientific views at international conferences, forums, and symposiums, expressing herself in her low monotonous voice just as

conscientiously and clearly in English as in Russian.

The mother realized her potential in the loftiest, most self-effacing way: she had given up her profession—and building houses was more than a profession, it was a vocation—for her husband's and daughter's sake—and taken over the function of the sight of one and the hearing of the other. However, she did not seem like a victim in the least. One day out in the woods a woman with the flushed face of a female warrior skied right across Sergeyev's path, turned sharply onto the track he was following and streaked off, exhaling fresh clouds of steam. And it was only her friendly smile and the way she blinked her greyish-blue eyes that enabled him to guess this young creature who was destroying the woods' serenity by speeding along, was none other than the blind mathematician's wife.

And then there was the granddaughter, who was so charmingly young. She had gold-flecked eyes and small pink ears which listened to the outside world so acutely that her lobes kept flaring up and becoming transparent; and other people's praise were a source of both embarrassment and bashful joy. She was the whole family's creation and reward.

"All these years I've kept a picture of my wife and even my daughter in my mind's eye," the mathematician once told Sergeyev over a glass of light wine in his room. "I know what they look like now, and that makes me

happy. But I don't know what my granddaughter looks like. But does it really matter that much? She's sweet, ever so sweet, I've created her picture for myself, and I need no other. Sight provides one with eighty-five per cent of one's information about the world but I regard hearing as the most important of the five senses. Imagine being deprived of music!.. It was not without reason that when Tolstoy was reconciling himself to the inevitability of death, he regretted only one thing—music. There would be no more of that... But why don't you wear a hearing aid?"

"Is my hearing really that bad?"

"It deteriorates rapidly."

So that's why he had started up this conversation!

"A hearing aid won't help me. It's not that sort of deafness I've got."

"It was the war, was it?" he asked at once.

Sergeyev was nonplussed. He did not wish to go into details but a direct affirmative answer would contain a kind of heroic untruth. On the other hand... Sergeyev had been sent to the hospital of the small town of Anna where the rear-lines of the Voronezh front were. A few days previously in the front line he had been baiting German soldiers by shouting "Hitler caput!" and other offensive things through a cardboard megaphone as part of his service in the counter-propaganda section. When the Germans had got thoroughly fed up with his nasal voice quite fatuously disturbing

the silence of the dreary autumn field regarded as no-man's-land, they fired some mortar and a splinter knocked his helmet askew but without causing him much pain. He felt no more pain than he had as a child when his arch-enemy Zhenka Melnikov had struck him on the forehead with the bit of pig-iron he had pulled off a staircase radiator and fired from a sling. However, just as before, he had felt infuriated because he was not able to get his own back. Zhenka had fired from a small window of his flat and the Germans were too far away. And he could not understand why a few days later he was packed off to hospital because he presumed he was in excellent shape. He hitched lifts in passing vehicles to the town and before going to the hospital he dropped in at the miserable little market and swopped a bobbin of thread for a glass of yoghurt. He had only just brought the rim of the cold glass up to his lips when a German aircraft dived out of the clouds and dropped a high-explosive bomb, just like it were laying an egg, on the little market. There was no air raid alarm, no anti-aircraft fire, no intermittent drone of an aircraft—it had been absorbed by the densely padded clouds and dank misty air. When Sergeyev was dug out, he was still clenching hold of the glass's indented bottom. Many years later at a dispensary a laryngologist had tapped his parietal bone with the tips of his fingers and diagnosed loss of hearing in the left ear due to contusion. "But you'll

leave me my right ear, will you?" Sergeyev had joked anxiously. "I'm not a soothsayer," the old doctor had replied with a sigh. Life had taught him humility, and he believed far more in the natural strength of the human organism than he did in medical prognoses. However, the courageous mathematician in whose grim experience the loss of one of the five senses had been virtually inevitable, considered it quite inappropriate to be even the slightest hopeful. He nonchalantly described to Sergeyev the future the latter had in store for him. "Oh well," thought Sergeyev, gulping down the wine with slightly more glee than necessary, "then I'll join your heroic clan if I muster the strength to, and if I don't, I'll borrow some off you..."

...Well now, my dear Sergeyev, have you or haven't you mustered the strength? You don't even know yourself yet. You got into a terrible flap when you found out that instead of spring songsters' voices you were hearing the loud gushing of blood in your narrowed arteries. So, you really did reckon you'd trick destiny? But it didn't work, and it couldn't anyway. You'll get the full dose of what the war planned for you in old age. Console yourself with the thought that old age is always hard, and physical trials and tribulations are not the worse by any means. And there's no such thing as a grand old age. Olympian Goethe who was totally in command of his five senses, and hale in body and mind right

to the end, suffered another, almost ludicrous but in fact most terrible blow: when he was over eighty he fell head over heels in love with an eighteen-year-old girl. So child-like was the naivety of the old man and great poet that he believed the girl's parents would gladly give their daughter's hand in marriage to the creator of *Werther* and *Faust*, and the idol of Europe. They, however, decided that the old man had gone mad (which was partly true), and, besides, there were so many other worthy suitors around—a baker's son, an apothecary, a promising magistracy clerk. The old poet's young heart was not destined to sing a last love song. He died, spiritually a broken man. Apparently, the girl did not marry either the baker's son, or the apothecary, or promising clerk. This is hard to believe for it sounds too lofty but, perhaps, "the dull songs of the earth could not take the place for her" of "the celestial chords" which had reached her young ears?

But let's leave Goethe to eternity. His sufferings are over—yours have only just begun. So far you've been deprived of nightingales and larks but you've still got crows. You still hear a lot of mechanical noises and loud music; you've only lost human speech in the cinema, and that is not so great a loss. Make the most of the world of sounds and remember your friends from the Weeping Birch more often. It is a pity that the head of the family belongs to a category of "in-

visible" people who are not rare in our cautious day and age. He has no address or telephone number and lives in such a security-restricted place that on his return there he, as it were, vanishes from the face of the earth. And recently Sergeyev has had particular need of him.

At the end of June he went for a walk along a woodland glade leading through a birch grove and then a dark fir wood to a clearing with three old oaks. He used to come this way often because of the chance encounters it afforded: now with an elk, now with a fox, now with a marten, and once in the gloaming some boars went thudding by. But then some hothouses were erected by the oaks, and the wild life fled this part of the woods. Where do they go to, the animals who are chased out by the building development in the Moscow region, where do they find quiet abodes? The papers often write with mystifying enthusiasm about "an elk on the edge of the city". What's there to be so happy about? Are city streets really more inviting for an elk than the woods around Moscow? Only the blackbirds have remained loyal to the glade and then recently there appeared some crazy owls who got day and night mixed up. In sunlight when they are supposed to be fast asleep with their round yellowish-green eyes firmly shut, they would tear out of the branches and dash about here and there, knocking into trees.

And you can imagine how overjoyed Sergeyev was when he suddenly spotted fifty feet or so away a young elk nibbling a bush. It was not taking any notice of the approaching man, and, after standing still for a moment, Sergeyev quickly strode towards it. The young elk had no intention of running off: so busy was it on sating itself that it had lost its vigilance. Every now and then it completely disappeared inside the bush, and then reappeared again on the edge, flecked with the shadows of leaves. With every step he took, Sergeyev became more convinced that he was seeing things. And when there was no doubt left that hearing was not the only sense he had lost, he went on inanely and pathetically convincing himself that it really was a young elk and not just a play of light and shade. A light breeze wafting through the glade and a slanting ray of sunlight had breathed delusive life into the hawthorn bush and the dry stalks of oakling entangled in it. Where's your hawk's eye, Sergeyev? Why, you used to hit a flying teal at sixty metres?..

The granddaughter of the security-restricted family was not security restricted and she had a Moscow telephone number. But this was too dangerous a liaison. All he needed to add to his numerous losses was Goethe's torments.

THE OUTSIDER

Kungurtsev was one of those craggy Siberians who can always impose his own firm sense of order upon any noise, disturbance or ugliness in life about him. His appearance, too, conformed perfectly to his character: a large head set squatly into his shoulders, a bulky, stiff body with a powerful protruding diaphragm. But now this rock was utterly dejected, although the matter was purely personal and cast not the slightest shadow upon the universe. Putyatin was bringing his new wife on a visit for the first time.

Alyosha Putyatin was Kungurtsev's closest, dearest friend. But no, that isn't quite the right way to put it, it's only in books you find a group of friends linked for life and death. In reality a man can have only one Friend, the man for whom he'll go through fire and water, the man with whom he has grown firmly together; all other friends if they exist are

at best good comrades. Only too often the great word "friend" is used for a casual acquaintance or a good fellow at the bar. But Putya was a friend even though their friendship had not undergone the test of war, or of anything bigger than lending money to buy a car, or getting hold of some medicine not easily found. But that was just the point. "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them." Therein lay the root of Othello's tragedy. Love, the real thing, is irrational; if it has to fall back on a reason, then it is some other feeling, in itself excellent, but lacking the foreordination, the recklessness, the selflessness of love. And the same applies to friendship. You carried me out of the fire, I renounced to you the woman I loved, therefore we are friends forever. Rubbish! One must not confuse friendship with gratitude or a sense of obligation. Friendship—this is when you simply feel good with a person, when any kind of effort falls away (a demanding friendship is the false invention of didactic literature). Friendship is happiness.

Kungurtsev liked everything about Alyosha Putyatin: his great height, his healthy leanness, the glow of his dark brown eyes, his deep, well-modulated voice, and his instant response to every impression. He was well braced to face life, strong and healthy, a fine hunter and fisherman, and he knew the taiga like his own home. As for being a leading

expert, the chief engineer of a big aluminium plant—that was his own affair. Kungurtsev had more thought and liking for the way he cut meat, drank vodka, laughed, chopped off dry branches, built a shelter or a fire, roared a song, and sometimes retired within himself, into his own seriousness and silence, his eyes seeing something far away.

It is certainly a fine thing to have a friend, but it's grand when he and his wife are like part of your family. Not a frequent case—far from it. Naturally, for the three young Kungurtsevs Uncle Alyosha was the most wonderful person. He had the best hunting dog in the world which had won a gold medal, he had a Volga car while dad hadn't even found time to get himself a Zhiguli, and a Belgian carbine (dad had an old Izhevka), he knew judo holds and yoga gymnastics. Maria Petrovna, apt to be sharp and even prickly, might well not have taken the Putyatins to her heart. But she did, and how! Whenever they appeared she at once smoothed down her prickles and became as soft as velvet. Of course, it would have been difficult not to like Lipochka, as everyone, even the children, called Putyatin's wife. She was the kindliest giantess in the world, generous in everything—tall like her husband but doubling him in girth, with a voice that could resound over the noisiest of the crowds; she was always merry, indefatigable, and loved most of all to be useful, to help people. When Lipochka

showed up everybody prepared to enjoy themselves, while the work involved in providing the enjoyment she cheerfully took upon herself.

As soon as she entered the Kungurtsevs' house, the kitchen, refrigerator, keeping cellar and pantry slipped quietly into her power. She loved cooking, decorating the table, looking after guests; this was her realm, the sphere of her talent.

Maria Petrovna had no use for anything outside her medicine. She was head doctor and head surgeon at a big local hospital, undertook the most complicated internal operations and was rightly proud when cases were sent to her even by the regional hospital. She really was an excellent surgeon and an efficient organiser, but all her energy went into her work, she had little left for home. Nor had she much inclination for domestic matters. The house was run by her mother—fussy, well-meaning but absent-minded from age. With Lipochka's arrival, however, the rather unordered domestic life of the Kungurtsevs blossomed out. The tiny Siberian meat dumplings called *pelmeni* were made; Kungurtsev could down those endlessly, but no more than thin and insatiable Putya—where on earth did he find room for it all in that lean belly of his? Buns were baked, stuffed with mushrooms, fish, cabbage, apples, bilberries, and black currants; vodka was mixed with various herbs and berries to

give it a special tang, beer was brewed and cooling drinks prepared from bird cherries. The handsome dinner service and the silver which had been Maria Petrovna's dowry saw the light of day, and of course guests were invited—it would have been a sin to enjoy all this alone.

There was something else which made Kungurtsev love the Putyatins' weekend visits—and they came nearly every Saturday, for they lived only about a hundred and fifty kilometres away. Maria Petrovna, softened by an excellent meal (on weekdays she had no time even for a cup of tea to say nothing of a dinner in the canteen), enlivened by a couple of glasses of cordial and most important, able to rest in complete freedom from all domestic worries, remembered that she was a woman and did not repulse her eager although submissive husband, as she did through the rest of the week. The two days of complete happiness which Lipochka gave them connected her somehow with those secrets closed against strangers. And for Kungurtsev that massive, yet positively attractive woman with a touch of grey in her short-cut hair blended strangely and tenderly with Maria Petrovna.

And now, like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, came the news: Putya had parted with Lipochka and married another woman. When had he managed it all? Where had he dug her up, this new one? How could he split up with Lipochka after all these years of love, harmo-

ny and happiness? Why had he not discussed it with his friends? How had he managed to keep it all concealed? Kungurtsev's strong head ached in a torment of bewilderment.

Maria Petrovna accepted it more simply. "Found someone younger. You're all the same, tom-cats!" There was actually no justification for the last, but she wanted to give vent to her outrage, and Kungurtsev said nothing.

The situation became still less clear when Putyatin brought Vera Dmitrievna, his new wife, to introduce her. To be more exact, he looked in for a moment on his way to Angarsk, where they were to pick up Vera Dmitrievna's daughter Olga. Kungurtsev decided that Putya had combined the two things so as to make the visit a brief one and avoid any sheen of celebration. He felt bound to introduce his wife to his old friends, but probably expected no great joy from it—or perhaps he simply did not know quite how to behave; he feared questions about Lipochka and began talking about leaving and being in a hurry almost before they had properly crossed the threshold and exchanged greetings.

Everybody felt stiff, awkward and uncomfortable, but nobody lifted a finger to relieve the tension. The boys had been sent off on some hastily invented errand and granny was kept occupied in the kitchen—they were afraid of the innocent forthrightness of youth and the slips of age. Vera Dmitrievna, the new

wife, acted more naturally than anyone else—in fact, she did not act at all, but behaved just as though all this had nothing to do with her. She showed no embarrassment, no challenge, no interest, nor yet any deliberate indifference, and the main thing—she showed no wish to win anybody's liking. She certainly wasn't so young, either, thirty-seven or eight. She had tired eyes, with crow's feet at the corners; her large mouth with drooping corners became fresh and youthful only when she smiled, but she smiled seldom. In repose her face was rather melancholy, there was certainly nothing of the siren about her. Not much of the Siberian, either. Her hair was dark, her brown eyes under wearily drooped lids seemed black and lightened only when her lashes rose, her skin was olive, her form slender, even fragile, but her legs were strong and muscular. "Where were you born?" Kungurtsev asked her. "By the Volga." "Have you been long in our parts?" She smiled. "In your parts, you could say all my life. My parents were Siberians. My father was an army officer, he was posted in Saratov. But after the war we all came back to Irkutsk." So it seemed she was a Siberian after all, but Kungurtsev didn't want to accept it. Her colouring, her figure, her ways—nothing about her followed the model so dear to his heart. Even her height was wrong. She was the average height for a woman, but beside her husband and the Kungurtsevs she looked very

small. Not like Lipochka, the right flanker of that giant company. The end of our mighty four, thought Kungurtsev sadly, as though this were the greatest loss.

Putya was so restless, strange and difficult that for the first time Kungurtsev was glad when he went. "Yes, yes," he said, "you'd better be off or you won't get back before dark." And Vera Dmitrievna seemed glad they were not urged to stay longer. "I'm sort of nervous, old man," Putya whispered to Kungurtsev. "I've never been a father before." This sent his friend's thoughts off in a new direction. For some reason Lipochka's powerful body had never brought forth new life, although after all, you couldn't know whose the failure was. Perhaps it was the daughter, not the mother, who had been the attraction? A paternal instinct had been aching in him. Putya's confidential whisper helped Kungurtsev to carry out an intention he had almost given up out of cowardice. On some excuse he pushed his friend into his study. "What about Lipochka? Where is she? Does she need anything?" Putya replied angrily, but it was a good anger. "It's bad for her, you know that yourself. She's gone to her sister in Tomsk. She'll go to work there. She said it would be easier for her that way. She decided it all herself, decided to go, too." "Naturally. You went tom-catting around while she—she—" Kungurtsev choked. Putya gave him a quiet cold look, said, "What

I didn't I didn't," and left the study.

When the Putyatins had gone Kungurtsev passed his ideas on to his wife. "I don't know, I don't know anything and I don't want to!" she waved it off. "I'm fond of Lipochka and I'll never take to that one." "I didn't think much of her myself," said Kungurtsev. "Sort of cold, an outsider. I don't trust that sort. He's finished, our Putya, finished!" "No, I wouldn't say that, either," said Maria Petrovna. "She isn't bitchy." This simple remark produced a big impression on Kungurtsev. He had expected Maria Petrovna to make mincemeat of Putya's new wife. He would have felt no surprise if the silent woman with the tired eyes and sad mouth had fetched the verdict - "Bitch! Keep her out of here!" But with all her dislike Maria Petrovna certified her acceptability. This meant that the family relationship could continue. Of course, their friendship with Putya would stand up to any test, but their meetings would have become almost impossible. That's what might have happened and Kungurtsev would have made no attempt to talk his wife over, accepting her verdict without argument. He had a keen eye for people's business qualities, but when it came to the moral side—here, his vision was often dulled.

Now, however, he decided to revive the custom of weekend visits, especially as he had a difficult job suddenly looming ahead and Putya could help. The regional Party committee

secretary had rung up and asked him to play host to a shooting crew making a big picture about Siberia. The secretary had named the head of the crew, saying, "You've heard of him, of course." Kungurtsev, who had failed to catch the name, growled back, "Think I'm a savage?" "So you realise whom we're sending you?" the Party secretary said impressively. After this there was no sense in asking why he, Kungurtsev, should be the one to show hospitality to this cinema VIP on his free day, sacrifice the Sunday too, fill them all up with food and drink, take them round, make a fuss of them and show them what Siberia and Siberians are!

Kungurtsev was director of an abrasives works, the biggest in Siberia. It had started before the Revolution alongside deposits of corundum and developed afterwards into a place of countrywide importance. The settlement which had grown up round it already claimed the status of a town. Around the original cluster of wooden cottages with shrill-voiced cocks, crooked vegetable gardens and brown-faced old women sitting on earth banks round the cottages had grown big blocks of flats, with shops, hairdressing saloons, tailor shops, cinemas, schools, nursery schools and nurseries in between them and on their ground stories.

The works dominated its surroundings. For its sake the railway that crossed the whole country had put forth a station, which in

turn put forth an asphalt road linking the station with the settlement, and from the factory gates other roads, dirt and concrete, rayed out in all directions. Because of the works, roofs bristled with TV aerials, posters announced the coming of theatre companies from Moscow, and a sports ground and swimming-pool were being built. Had the works suddenly ceased to exist, life would have wilted, and then abandoned the harsh, unfertile land altogether.

Naturally, the works director was god and king over the area within range of the smoke which drifted from the factory chimneys. His realm included the rapid, cold, clear river with creeks and flood pools that cut the town in two, the small islands thick with wild currant, the water meadows blue with forget-me-nots, the taiga with mushrooms in the thickets and partridges among the trees, and gullies choked with bird cherry. Who else could be the right man to show hospitality to important guests, to treat them to the pleasures of his stern Siberian region!

This was how Kungurtsev came by his clever idea. The cinema VIP was coming from Irkutsk by train, a car would meet him. A car would be needed, too, for a proper picnic including a night by the campfire. That would mean that the chauffeur of the works car he used would have to give up his Saturday and Sunday. Of course, he could have other days off instead, or be paid for the overtime,

whichever he wanted, but the director had never yet used the car for his personal needs. Of course, this wasn't exactly personal, it was a sort of Party assignment; nevertheless, he felt awkward about it. But Putya, now—he was always glad of a chance to have his hands on the wheel. With all the years he'd been driving—he was already on his third car—he was as keen as though he had only just started. If a man's a natural born driver, then whatever position he fills, his real delight is driving. If he asked Putya for help, and not just as a guest, he would not have that uncomfortable sense of letting Lipochka down. Besides, he needed Putya not only as driver, but for good company at table; Kungurtsev himself wasn't much of a talker, and knew next to nothing about cinema matters.

All these considerations he laid out before Maria Petrovna. "Why beat about the bush?" she laughed. "If you want to see Putya then get him here, look at him all you want." All the same, when he rang up Putya, who was delighted and talked every kind of happy nonsense, Kungurtsev replaced the invitation with a request for help. Putya's mood fell at once, he thought he was being asked over alone, for the sake of the Moscow guests. "Don't worry, old man. I'll do all you want," he said in a dead voice. Kungurtsev realised that he had overdone things in his loyalty to Lipochka, but stubbornly keeping to his roundabout path, he went on, "Remember, they'll be

coming at ten in the morning, three of them, so you'll have to dash over to us first, and then to the station." "That'll be fine," cried Putya happily. "I'll dump my womenfolk down with you and then meet the train. Expect us at nine sharp. Cheers!"

It hadn't been such a bad idea after all. He had avoided a direct invitation to Putya's new wife, avoided any unpleasant accent, not let Lipochka down and brought Putya to join in his own cares, which ought to give him a moral lift. Kungurtsev was convinced Putya must be wilting under the stings of conscience.

Putya arrived punctually as usual, with his wife, his step-daughter and dog—that splendid Romka. Kungurtsev and Romka had not seen one another for some time and their meeting was rapturous. Romka's coat, short, blue-grey with brown patches, held the reflection of other, more cloudless, days. Lipochka had been devoted to him but Romka, no spoiled domestic pet but a true hunter, wanted nobody but his master. He took food only from his master's hand and whatever he might be doing always remembered him, and would come running to look up into his face as though to make sure he was doing the right thing, and nothing more was required of him. If he was hurt out hunting he would not allow anybody but Putya to examine and treat the wound, or to clip the fur round the pads on his paws, brush him or wash his eyes. If Putya was away for a long time he did allow Lipoch-

ka to take care of him; he ate no food, fretting for his master, but he drank water, permitted himself to be taken for walks and submitted to brushing, as though he knew he must keep himself spruce. He had an endearing trick of suddenly giving her hand a lick, as though in recognition of her right to be with him and his master. And each warm, affectionate lick made her whole massive body thrill with delight. Herself capable of boundless devotion, she was grateful for every kindly gesture, from whomever it came—an adult, a child or an animal.

Kungurtsev saw at once that no contact with Romka had been established by the new mistress and her daughter. Vera Dmitrievna simply took no notice of him, while the girl only got on the dog's nerves with aimless demonstrative cries. Olga appeared older than her fourteen years. She was tall, with an olive complexion, and a figure already well-formed; she promised to become a real beauty. She had little resemblance to her mother; evidently she had taken all the best features from her father. In her behaviour she showed a mixture of diffidence and haughtiness. When the Kungurtsev boys flung themselves rapturously on Romka, quite ignoring the young beauty, she shrugged contemptuously, tossed her head, presenting a perfect profile and asserted her authority as mistress by ordering, "Romka—go to your place," and with unusual meekness the dog crept under the table. This turned the

brothers' attention to their guest. And very quickly the eldest and the middle one realised that the real wonder of the day was not their old, jowly, slobbering, furry, golden-eyed friend, but the dark, mysterious stranger who had suddenly turned up as Uncle Alyosha's daughter. Only the youngest remained faithful to Romka, but at the end of the day, by the river, when the campfire was flinging its sparks up into the darkness of the forest, even he proposed to Olga that they run away together to that great railway construction called BAM.

Kungurtsev's lads were three hypostases of the human spirit: in the eldest, big, powerful and almost a little wild from an abundance of strength, the flesh triumphed. The second, with all his desperate efforts to imitate the elder, all his vain physical rivalry, was most himself when he stood fascinated before a machine, blueprint or a riddle of organic life; he belonged to the kingdom of thought. In the eleven-year-old Benjamin of this family the spirit burgeoned; he seldom let his brothers draw him into their wild games, he was always floating in space, hearing the music of the spheres; his attitude to thoughts, objects and phenomena held a delicate subtlety unattainable for the others; he could be pitiful in his estrangement from ordinary earthly standards, but could also cause irritation, this bit of a kid, by a lofty alienation, and as in the biblical story, he was loved by his father with painful tenderness and fear.

But even this drifting soul betrayed Lipochka, unable to resist the magic of feminine charm.

Vera Dmitrievna did not merely ignore the dog. Now and then he would come running up and recognising his master's smell on her, would thrust his nose into her hand with a snort, but she made no response. Kungurtsev thought the dog probably wanted water.

"We forgot his bowl," said Vera Dmitrievna absently.

"But he's got his own bowl here," cried Kungurtsev, delicately emphasising Romka's lawful place as a member of the family. Vera Dmitrievna, however, made no move. Kungurtsev brought water; Romka sniffed at it from a distance but did not drink.

"Don't you like dogs?" Kungurtsev asked Vera Dmitrievna with a smile that was not too friendly.

"To be honest, not very much."

"And your daughter, too?"

"I wouldn't say so. But when she was little she was frightened by a big dog. She even started to stammer. I had to take her to a logopedic doctor."

"But how can anyone dislike dogs? A dog's the best of anything man has adapted."

"Alyosha thinks the same. But I'm not so sure. They took a fine wild creature, natural in all its ways, and turned it into a fawning flatterer and slave. What's so wonderful about that? But man is so vain..."

"A fawning flatterer?" Kungurtsev gasped.

"You should take a look at an alsatian watch-dog—you wouldn't find much fawning there!"

"What are you talking about? Those are concentration camp dogs," said the woman with reproving distaste.

"To hell with them then," Kungurtsev flushed. "What about hunting dogs? The intelligence, the devotion!"

"Devotion—again, to man's advantage. And intelligence? Just scent and training."

"But Romka?" Kungurtsev was not listening. "How could anyone not love Romka, handsome and wise?"

She shrugged.

"Yes, a handsome beast... I never had a dog, neither as a child nor—later on. I suppose you have to get used to liking them." This held a conciliatory note.

Don't squirm, he thought angrily. It isn't the Siberian way. You said you don't like dogs, well then, stick to it and don't make excuses or twist and turn.

"Perhaps you don't like animals in general?"

Again she shrugged and the corners of her mouth dropped.

"I'm sorry for them."

"It isn't pity I'm talking about," Kungurtsev insisted; he knew that he was going beyond the limits of decency, but he couldn't help it.

"Why can't you let her alone?" said Maria Petrovna crossly. "All right, she doesn't like them! Are you satisfied? She likes human

beings," she added with an enigmatic expression.

"I don't altogether understand exactly what that means," said Vera Dmitrievna quietly. "It's too abstract."

"If you worked a while with me in the hospital you'd soon understand!"

"Possibly. But I've worked in an office and I know nothing of all these—what shall I call them?—broad emotions. People differ, some are good, others bad. Although for that matter, what's a good person? For some he's good, while others haven't any use for him at all."

"You can turn anything inside out that way," said Kungurtsev.

Obviously she had herself in mind: see, I suit Putyatin, but I'm not so very much to your taste. The talk was taking a dangerous turn.

"Well, what if instead of people, individuals, we say 'a people', a nation? Is everything clear then?" he said, pleased at finding a way out.

"Undoubtedly." Her lips curved in a faint smile. "But I think that's obligatory only for leaders and heroes, ordinary mortals can keep to a narrow circle. Those whom I love, I love deeply, and I can only regret that they are so few. Because it's so very pleasant to love people."

Lipochka loved everyone, thought Kungurtsev without noticing the almost open

mockery of the last words. But Maria Petrovna did not miss it, and she peremptorily put an end to the discussion.

"All right! Each one to his own taste. Whether we love people or not, we have to lay the table."

"I'll help," said Kungurtsev. "And I'm sure Vera Dmitrievna won't refuse."

"Of course." The response was polite but nothing more.

"I take it housekeeping isn't much in your line?" asked Kungurtsev.

"To tell the truth—no." She found it suitable to add: "We had a disorderly, bleak home. I don't know if Alyosha's told you."

"He hasn't told us anything."

"We lived anyhow. But that isn't interesting. Tell me, rather, what I ought to do."

"Ought to"—would Lipochka ever have asked! She just rolled up her sleeves, tied on an apron and set to work so that the very house shook! Of course, this woman was here for the first time. All the same, a real housewife would go to the kitchen, lift every lid, peep into the oven, investigate the refrigerator and know at once what had to be done. But Maria Petrovna didn't let this guest into the kitchen, only asked her to lay the table.

"The tablecloths, dishes and cutlery are in the sideboard."

The Kungurtsevs themselves dived into the kitchen full of smoke, steam and acrid smells of burning food where stout Anna Ivanovna

was gasping for air, her forget-me-not eyes ready to pop out of her head.

"Rest a bit, ma," said Kungurtsev.

"I don't know if I've done things right," said the old woman pitifully. "I haven't Lipochka's ways."

"Sh!" her daughter and son-in-law warned simultaneously.

Of course she lacked Lipochka's talent. One thing was burned, a second half-cooked, a third overdone. But then none of them had Lipochka's talent—they jostled, they got in one another's way, grabbing for a salt cellar or vinegar bottle all at once, they forgot to cut the bread, to mix mayonnaise with the salad, to drop slivers of red peppers into a bottle with diluted medical spirit. The whole bunch of them were unable to cope with what Lipochka had done alone—easily, cheerfully and without fuss.

Barking and noise by the front door heralded the arrival of the guests. Kungurtsev moved to meet them but the arrivals, the children and Romka completely frantic with excitement had tangled themselves into one fantastic knot. Then all this fuss was blocked by Putya's tall figure.

"Assignment carried out!" he reported, and seeing his wife busy at the table behind Kungurtsev's shoulders, he cried gaily, "So they've harnessed you already?"

"It won't hurt her," said Maria Petrovna.

"On the contrary!" Putya was delighted to

see his wife drawn into the Kungurtsev life.

He hurried to her, clearing a path in his wake. And the knot by the hall stand untied of itself; the boys fell back to the wall, the oldest grabbed Romka by the collar and pulled him close, and the cinema VIP in a grey checked suit, very small, very thin and very old, pushed forward to meet Kungurtsev, one hand outstretched for a shake. Of course, he had never known of Kungurtsev's existence until his vagabond fate had brought him to this godforsaken spot, but his movements appeared so sincerely, unrestrainedly affectionate, one might have thought he had longed to find here the light of truth and spiritual healing. The grip of his bony hand with the brown liver spots of age was unexpectedly strong. A cameraman, Kungurtsev guessed. Used to carrying the thing about. And he responded to the grip Siberian style. It was a draw, and they were both highly pleased with one another. The personage was handed over to Maria Petrovna, while Kungurtsev met the fat, bald manager of the crew, Bouryga, and a pretty girl called Lena. She was very slim, with a rather large head and a very child-like look; but she quickly informed him that she had graduated from the cinema institute and was really entitled to be second director, but she had agreed to be merely an assistant for the privilege of working with such a master. So, thought Kungurtsev, he must be a director, then.

Taking advantage of the slight confusion which usually precedes the start of the feast, Kungurtsev drew Lena aside and spoke in a conspiratorial undertone.

"It's sort of awkward to ask—" he hesitated, "but it can't be helped, does our highly honoured guest—excuse me—"

"I don't know," said Lena quickly and blushed. "I'm not an assistant for such things." She thought Kungurtsev wanted to know if a certain secluded spot was needed.

"That isn't what I meant." Kungurtsev's embarrassment was even greater than Lena's. "You see—I don't go very often to the pictures, and I never bother with the TV, and in general, I'm dreadfully out of things. What's the latest film—?"

"Heavens!" Lena interrupted, in indignant amazement. "Why, the African epic, of course!"

Kungurtsev clapped his hand to his forehead. Actually he knew nothing about documentary films except for the brief newsreels shown before the feature. But of course the crusty celebrity wouldn't bother himself with such trifles.

"And how does one address him?"

"Chief. Right back in college days; I studied under him. But that's what everyone calls him at the studio, too. After all, he's the founder of..."

At this point they were invited to table. At the head of the table they placed the

celebrity with Maria Petrovna on his right hand and Putya on his left. Kungurtsev sat beside his wife, to be able to see Putya clearly. Lena was on his right, then the children, and opposite sat Bouryga, Vera Dmitrievna and the old grandmother. When at last all were seated and Putya, leaning across the table, his arm reaching to the farther end like the jib of a crane, filled glasses large and small with vodka, wine and berry cordial, Kungurtsev's swelling heart told him how badly he had missed Putya all this time—missed his pleasant leanness, the hollows on his temples, his warm brown eyes, long agile arms and velvety voice.

This, however, was not Putya's day, and the first toast was to the cinema guests. Cleverly playing at Siberian taciturnity, leaving as implications the contributions made by the guest to the country's cinema art, subtly bringing the chief into the limelight without once mentioning his sacred name, as though it were tabu, Kungurtsev gave his toast a brilliant and mysterious gleam. But the director was not to be outdone; in his answer he linked the Siberian expanses with the boundless Siberian hospitality, hailing House, Family and Host whose name he had undoubtedly already managed to forget. And with that the ceremonial part ended.

Now all attacked the food, and Kungurtsev could rest his affectionate gaze on Putya. How beautifully he managed everything; he

did not forget the director, he joked with Maria Petrovna, offered dishes to his neighbour Bouryga who ate as though he had only just ended a stretch of starvation diet, himself found time to eat and drink, drew the young ones into the talk and never allowed it to die down. Putya knew many things and never blew wordy soap bubbles. He could talk about fishing for grayling and omul, hunting wild ram and Manchurian elk, about Siberian flowers and herbs, birds and beasts, about cars and planes, about the rivers and lakes and the minerals of the region, about prospecting and construction, the problems of the Baikal-Amur railway line and the latest technical achievements, about world science and the Decembrists exiled to Siberia a century and a half ago; this last was his favourite topic. About the things he did not know, or knew little, Putya said nothing, and listened gladly to what others said. But what really mattered was that this was the Putya whose side had so often been pressed closely against Kungurtsev's on cold night camps during bear or deer hunts, with whom he had seen dawn and sunrise, with whom he had coped with difficulties on treks and with whom old age could be met without fear.

But Kungurtsev was not allowed to revel for long in the sight of his friend. The great man required too much attention by requiring nothing. He pushed everything away and only begged that nobody trouble about him. His

thin hands pressed to his breast, he begged them not to fill his glass—he couldn't drink, blood pressure, ischemia; he begged them not to put things on his plate, he'd a stomach like a sparrow's, it wouldn't hold anything. So one had to urge and beg, almost kneel to him: "Just try a tiny bit of omul, it's smoked in the special local way!" He would make an endless fuss, wailing, "Not so much! You'll kill me!" Then he would eat everything with high enjoyment, praise it to the skies and call down the table to the manager Bouryga, who nodded with a full mouth and protruding eyes. And the hosts would start off again: "The mushrooms—our own pickling, you simply have to try them!" Again a long resistance followed by energetic work of the lean jaw. "Divine!" "And now a cabbage bun, see, this piece is looking straight at you." Just like you do with a child. As a matter of fact he ate and drank everything, as they soon found out, no worse than anyone else. Refusing with horror the home-made pepper spirit—diluted medical spirit with slivers of red Bulgarian peppers—he kept pouring himself with the expression of a good little boy one glassful after another of innocent-looking red cherry cordial of equal, impressive strength.

A wicked idea slid of itself into Kungurtsev's mind: the cordial might lay the director on his back and they would go to the river, the usual company. But this elvish or, as his

mother-in-law would say, gutless man possessed an enviable endurance. He did not become drunk, he only became benevolent, he glowed and seemed strangely to expand, absorbing everything around him. Small and fragile as he was, with a weak husky voice, he nevertheless dominated the table. Chekhov, it seems, has pronounced the idea that on the stage the part of king is played by the courtiers who accord him royal honour. Manager Bouryga, now and then, tearing himself away from food, and Lena, who was pecking like a bird, likewise played "king"; and with Lena it was not at all the respect due from an assistant, it arose from her real admiration for a master who had also been her teacher. They first drew the children into this play, and then the adults at the table. And now all were playing "king", and he, without himself wishing it, expanded and grew taller. Kungurtsev as host was glad to see the honour paid to his guest, but he began to miss Putya in it. Putya was a poor courtier and retired into the shade.

Tired with the work of his jaws, Manager Bouryga sighed noisily and proclaimed for all to hear that Lake Baikal was being ruined.

"How's that?" the director clasped his thin hands.

"Permission's been given to transport oil in barges, and when they're filled a certain percentage is inevitably spilt into the water. And Baikal's a closed reservoir."

"So long as I remember, Baikal's always

been on the verge of ruin," Kungurtsev observed. "But so far it has survived."

"It was saved in the cinema," said Putya with a dry laugh. "Remember the end of that picture, *By the Lake*? A glass of Baikal water, clear as an infant's tear drops."

"They give you water like that even now at the cellulose works," Lena remarked.

"Only visitors from other places," said Vera Dmitrievna who had up to now been silent. "They wouldn't fool the locals."

"So far as I know Baikal's always been on the verge of ruin," Kungurtsev repeated; he did not like this talk. "Always—but all the same, even the omul are being restored."

"Call those omul?" said Putya. "A real omul floats in its own fat."

"Nothing will happen to Baikal," said the director suddenly, clearly and distinctly as though he were reading it from a book. "All the oil will be carried away by the Angara. The loading will be done below its source."

"And what about unloading the oil—or isn't there any leakage with that?" Maria Petrovna put in.

Why did she have to interfere? The question hung in the air. The director had closed his eyes, after every effort he required a little time to recuperate. Kungurtsev himself was not well informed on these matters, and the encyclopaedic Putya was sitting with an empty, absent expression. This was when Kungurtsev realised how difficult things must

have been for his friend recently. Pulled tormentingly two ways, in spiritual confusion, with constant lies—because this was inevitable however honestly he acted, even silence can equal a lie—in all this he had lost himself, lost his broad, avid interest in life; he had probably read nothing and naturally fallen behind events, he, who was accustomed always to be at their apex. Poor Putya, poor Putya! It's difficult to up-end your life when you're no longer young. Kungurtsev suddenly wanted to do something good and kind for Putya, right away, now. He rose and said loudly:

"Vera Dmitrievna, your health!"

Her brows flew up in surprise, she bowed slightly and took a sip of wine. Kungurtsev drained his glass with one gulp and banged it down on the table.

Spearing a pickled mushroom with his fork, Kungurtsev caught sight of Putya's face, its expression not merely one of friendly recognition of the compliment paid to his wife, but of something repulsive: a kind of slavish grovelling. "If you want it I'll bark, if you want it I'll crawl to your feet. If you order it I'll kill!" This was the degrading servility he read in Putya's unpleasant grimace of gratitude. It was like a death sentence passed on Lipochka. Better if he hadn't pushed himself forward with his toast. Especially as Vera Dmitrievna had not accepted his alms. Was she utterly indifferent to what the Kungurtsevs thought of her, or was it a kind of inner

obtuseness, hardness, or still worse, a contemptuous self-confidence? But Putya! Grovelling because of one courteous gesture to his wife. There had never been anything like this between them. They had accepted everything from one another as the right and natural thing, without gratitude and without offence. To think they'd come to this!

Kungurtsev's face darkened, he withdrew inwardly from his surroundings, forgot his duties as host. When he surfaced again he heard the rather tipsy Lena explaining across the table to sober, impassive Vera Dmitrievna: "He's seen so much! He's been everywhere! All the greatest events of history have passed before him. He shot films about the First World War, the Provisional Government, the storming of Perekop, the Moscow visit of Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. He filmed the murder of Rasputin—"

"He didn't film Golgotha by any chance?" asked Vera Dmitrievna.

So she can bite, thought Kungurtsev.

"No. That event was exaggerated later. But at about that time he filmed Tiberius on Capri," Lena answered smoothly.

Good girl! Settled her nicely, Kungurtsev thought approvingly.

"He's seen so many great events that now it's only the simple things of life he values," Lena continued. "He says it's only the everyday things that stand out against the background."

Good for the old 'un, Kungurtsev decided.

After the mass of hors d'euvres and mushroom soup with meat buns, all with one accord refused the second course. They drank jellied currant juice with honey cakes, and Putya sent a champagne cork up to hit the ceiling.

"Now I know what Siberian hospitality means," said the director, clinking glasses with Kungurtsev.

Eh, friend, if you'd come to us a bit ealier, you'd have really found out what it is, you'd know how sweet every mouthful can be when it's accompanied by an apt, kindly word. Folks can stuff themselves like Bouryga in any canteen, but to conduct a table with real grace—that's a fine art and but a few possess it. There was one we had, she possessed it. She had them all dancing to her piping. They stuffed their bellies and wings grew on their shoulders which lifted them from the table feeling they had been honoured and caressed, themselves in the kindliest mood, and even unconscious of the weight of our rich food. They were like men on one ship. But now each one goes his own way. One belches with his hand to his mouth for manners, another spins some funny yarn for reasons of his own, a third's actually not here at all, the main guest is dozing, the hostess is glad the second course is untouched and there's no need to cook supper, and the host himself has gone soft and mushy like a lump of shit in a thaw.

Yes, and there's a friend of the house who grovels for an insincere toast. Well—to hell with it, it could be still worse...

Maria Petrovna, seeing his despondency, took the chance to whisper in his ear.

"Our guest's in raptures about you. At last, he says, I've met a real Siberian crag!"

I'm a wet rag, and no Siberian crag, thought Kungurtsev.

Getting things ready for camping out was mostly a male affair and this was where Putya really shone. He had all the skill of the experienced traveller, hunter and fisherman. But today he excelled. Everything he did went fast. The women were still busy in the kitchen with dinner pails, bowls and pans, and he had already packed into the car blankets, cushions, dishes, thermos flasks of coffee, folding chairs, a polythene bag of bones for Romka and all the things needed for a forest camp.

At last everything was ready and the first party—the driver, Vera Dmitrievna, the Moscow guests and Kungurtsev—set off. They were to drive to the wharf and take a tent and inflatable rubber boat from the boating station. At the last moment Romka raced out, barking, and scratched frantically at the side window, demanding his lawful place with his master. Kungurtsev, sitting in front, opened the door and took the dog on his knees. Romka was touchingly thin and light. He trembled and whined, shocked by such un-

heard-of treachery on the part of his master.

For some reason Putya took them a long way round, past the hospital where Maria Petrovna worked, past the new cinema and the swimming-pool construction. At first Kungurtsev thought Putya had taken the wrong road and almost said so, but then guessed that he wanted to show these Moscow people the best of Kungurtsev's realm. Putya manoeuvred so skilfully that the factory, its offices and the new entrance were seen several times from the most advantageous aspects.

Kungurtsev was touched, although slightly irritated, by his friend's naive efforts to impress a famous cinema director by what was after all a very ordinary factory. But now the director showed an unusual perceptiveness and professional expertise. His old, rheumy, watering eyes picked out somewhere inside the factory yard a blackened, one-story building—the former factory office, where the workers had gone for their pay before the Revolution. This bit of a place had been preserved deliberately through all rebuilding, as a kind of monument. Putya had a favourite expression, "dig to the root", which he used to designate the highest level of understanding and ingenuity. The old director quickly dug to the root about the office.

"Quite right, sensible fellows to keep that old ruin, let everyone see how it all began." He began to shower Kungurtsev with brief,

precise questions, all of them essential and to the point. And Kungurtsev, factory director, replied willingly although in his usual unhurried manner. Then the film director broke off.

"No more questions?" Kungurtsev asked, smiling.

The old man did not answer; he was asleep, felled in an instant by weariness and all he had drunk at dinner.

He wakened at the wharf—a resounding name given to a platform of planks by the owners of the local fleet of motor boats, rowboats and sailing boats. He opened his eyes, took in through the fog of half-awakening the inside of the car, and outside it the boat-sheds, the broad swift river, the taiga on the far bank and the great sky, and was delighted with his return to this wonderful world.

"Have I been asleep? Lena, your teacher must be getting old."

Kungurtsev and Putyatin emerged from the shed, each dragging a huge orange-coloured sack. One contained a tent, the other the boat. You would have thought nothing more could possibly have been packed into that car, but Putyatin with cheerful confidence, combining Herculean strength with an exact eye, moved something, transferred something, squashed something and the car seemed to expand, the passengers on the back seat were jammed into a tight clot, and the two huge sacks found their place.

Putyatin backed—almost into the river, then turned, climbed the steep bank in bottom gear and clattered over a rattling wooden bridge to the other side. He drove the car along a winding forest track, over knotted pine and fir roots, with cones shooting out from under the wheels, then turned sharply off towards the river and into the tall grass of a meadow. The car advanced through a green tunnel and halted right by the water.

After quickly unloading the car, Kungurtsev and Putyatin blew up the rubber boat, and then the driver raced back for the others—Maria Petrovna and the children.

The film director was given a folding metal chair, and Kungurtsev dragged the rubber boat to the water and began loading sacks and baskets. The director reflected that the massive, fundamental preparations for a modest picnic by the water would have sufficed for a whole cinema expedition. Except that they would have required more people and more time to set up camp. Here Kungurtsev accepted help only from fat Bouryga, and sent Lena off to pick forget-me-nots. Vera Dmitrievna wandered off along the bank where the pink spears of willow-herb swayed in the wind. Romka chased about and ran into the water up to his belly, frightening yellow warblers from the reeds. The old director closed his eyes and fully relaxed, but as often happened, memory brought up things which had nothing whatever to do with

his surroundings. A blood-spattered arena, the shoulders and back of a huge bull bristling with banderillas, cushions over which the pale, sweating matador with a bleeding wound in his groin stumbled. This had been in Toledo, when Dominguin, gored, could not finish off his last bull. The old man opened his eyes. He had seen too much blood in his life, and not only in wartime. Blood was shed wherever people wanted to do something out of the ordinary, whether it was the building of a hydroelectric station, or a bullfight, the conquering of Everest, or the finish of a marathon at the Olympics, when the victor collapsed with blood pouring from his throat. A considerable amount of his own blood, too, had been shed in various circumstances. He hated its colour, its smell and its salty taste. The rubber boat in which Kungurtsev and Bouryga had seated themselves was blood colour inside. He turned away from it. It was pleasanter to look at the rich green of the sedge, Romka's spotted body flickering in it, the rose-coloured willow-herb which bordered the meadow and a woman's white blouse.

In a little while, however, he had to sit down on the bottom of that bright red boat, as though in a pool of blood. It revolted him to the point of nausea, but he gave no sign.

A strong current seized the boat and carried it downstream. Kungurtsev lay on the fragile aluminium oars and drove it towards the farther bank. His shirt was unbuttoned,

baring his sunburnt, hairy chest with trickles of sweat running down into the grey mat. His strong abdomen moved up and down. The little director crouched in the bottom of the boat watched the rower with enjoyment mingled with a faint melancholy. What could be better than youth and health? To him, fifty-year-old Kungurtsev seemed a youth. But how old am I, he thought, and could not remember. It was a long time since he had known. Perhaps he had always been? And always would be? As a rare exception, nature granted eternal life to her favourites. He knew of some famous people who had firmly decided never to die. Why shouldn't he become one of them? Little is needed for that if you are of the elect—only to avoid obvious stupidities. Titian, now, had already entered immortality, but he did not preserve himself from the plague—his own fault. And he had seen a shepherd in Mingrelia who had lived for several centuries and had long ago stopped keeping count of his years. But him—it was early yet for him to forget his age. Sclerosis?—Rubbish! He had no fear of sclerosis because he knew that on the floor and in the cutting room he would do his job as though his arteries were twenty years old. Sclerosis left professional skills untouched, and everyday eccentricities actually made age lovable. But it had to be immortality, longevity was nonsense. His first days could be reckoned as very far off, yet he remembered as though it

were yesterday how his mother had soaped him in the little zinc bath and he had slapped his taut slippery stomach. All that could end flowed as fast as a lightning flash, only immortality was long drawn out.

Something thrust at the hand he rested on the round edge of the boat. It was Romka swimming after them, his chocolate brown head lifted high out of the water. But when they came to the midstream the dog realised that his master had stayed behind, and turned back.

Close to the bank a long boat emerged from an island thick with bird cherry and crossed their path. An old man and old woman sat in it. They were floating with the current, the old man steering with a stern oar. On the bottom of the boat stood wicker baskets filled with wild currants, red and black. When they came level with the rubber boat, the old man raised his cap from a white bald head and the old woman smiled.

"Good evening," said Kungurtsev. "I see you've found plenty. Are those all from the islands?"

"That's right," said the old man and the boat slid past.

Kungurtsev helped the director to clamber out and up the steep bank. At the top, among old pines which drowned the reflections of their crowns in the swift river, there was a circular glade, partly bright green, partly scorched brown by the long hot summer.

Against the brown background butter mushrooms glowed crimson in big round splashes. And as soon as you strained your eyes a little, you could see the heads of other mushrooms, pale yellow and slimy, clustering among the roots of the pines at the edge of the forest. Kungurtsev suggested that Lena and Bouryga collect a few and settled the director once more in the shade of a fir.

The director obediently sat down on the folding chair and seemed to sink into reverie. He liked to submit unconditionally to a wise alien will. Never in his life, he thought, had he felt so well, so calm and secure, as on this day, when strange people had taken him under their wing. On a scorched stump opposite a bright-coloured nutbreaker settled and eyed this colourful person trustfully with its round ochre eyes. And the director in turn fixed the bird with eyes faded but still keen. They liked one another, bird and man, and it was a pity when some unseen enemy frightened the bird away.

Kungurtsev unfastened the sacks, spread out the inflatable floor of the tent, and found that the foot pump, which had been capricious for some time, had now gone on strike. It would have to be inflated by nature's pump—lungs. But that required two, blowing from either end; one man would never manage it. Bouryga, the mushroom seeker, had vanished into the thickets, the old director was no use; he would have to wait for Putya.

And recalling Putya, Kungurtsev realised that he had left that wife of his on the other bank.

Heavens, how could that have happened? When he had ferried the director and Lena over, Vera Dmitrievna had been picking handfuls of tall willow-herb. His eye had caught her pale blouse, but it was an absent-minded, unseeing eye; he did not quite realise he was leaving her behind, or maybe... It only shows that a man must answer for everything chance brings. Sudden forgetfulness, an ambiguous slip of the tongue, awkward gestures that can hurt somebody's feelings—all these are signs of the unconscious life within us, more real and truthful than our outward, deliberate behaviour. Conscious thought had caused him to propose a hypocritical toast to her, but—he had forgotten to take her into the boat. He had not left the faceless Bouryga, or anything from the load, but he had forgotten his friend's wife, with a self-pretence of not recognising her in her pale blouse among the pink flowers.

A fine thing. What would Putya say? But before he had time to wonder about that Putya himself appeared in swimming trunks and rubber boots, quite dry except for the tips of the boots which gleamed with water.

"You been walking on the water like Saint Jurgen?" Kungurtsev asked, himself surprised at his own brazenness.

"Some fishermen brought me over. Had you forgotten us, or what?"

"How'd I know you'd be so quick?" Kungurtsev had caught the Ariadne thread and now followed it with confidence. "Did you find your flowergirl?"

"What flowergirl?"

"Your wife, who else? So taken up with the willow-herb, she forgot everything else in the world."

"A-a-ah!" breathed Putya with the relief of a man ready to accept any lie possessing the least semblance of truth. "She collected a huge bouquet but it faded at once. All right, I'll fetch them all over now."

"And then—a bathe?" said Kungurtsev happily.

"Sure—the usual timetable!"

The nutcracker which left the scorched stump so suddenly had had time to throw a spell over the old man. No doubt about it, its brilliant yellow eyes possessed magic power, because after its disappearance queer things began to happen. First, a naked man in high boots appeared, drawing the director's thoughts to a Sioux reservation, where the pitiful remnants of a once mighty, proud tribe, were now meekly dying out; he had shot a film of them once, and smoked a pipe with an old, sick, half-drunk chief; then the Sioux vanished, replaced by a man and woman in modern clothes who started tipping mushrooms out on the ground beside him. The mushrooms soon rose into a pile, a whole mountain, and he began to be afraid it would

collapse and bury him. One of those foolish accidents which usually cut off the destiny of the elect. Titian was killed by the plague, Konenkov by a draught, and he would die under a mushroom mountain. And it actually did come sliding down but without causing him the slightest harm. Now he saw a crowd of people, and some were quite young, performing some sort of wild, apparently ritual dance round a girl with long sunburnt legs. Then the Sioux returned with a stout gringo and both lay down on their bellies and began blowing into a huge flat hide, one at either end. The hide surged up in humps, it breathed, it rose, it swelled with danger, but now the director had stopped being afraid. Something like this had happened to him before: the forest thicket, an animal preparing to spring, somebody's eye getting his head in the sights, somebody aiming an arrow, somebody's hand with a hatchet. But the present so quickly becomes the past that you need only endure for an instant and you are saved, for the bullet, the arrow, the shining hatchet and the gaping jaws all slip away in time.

So he did not move, did not change his position, only allowed his tired eyelids to drop; when he raised them again, instead of the billowing beast stood a neat orange-coloured hut, and something warm with an appetising smell was thrust into his hand.

The fog of exotic visions disappeared and the unhurried, secure, plentiful Siberian life

continued. He accepted the piece of fried meat and a gold-rimmed blue wine glass. The Sioux, who turned into that nice chap Putyatin, began pouring pepper-laced vodka into the glass.

"But Putya, we've got cherry cordial here," the gringo Kungurtsev said reproachfully.

"No, no, I want the same as you!" cried the director and with unexpected sprightliness flung himself up from the chair and taking a brief flight became a slender, elegant, sinewy gentleman. "To the taiga!" said the director and tossed down the glassful.

Kungurtsev followed his example and was caught by a disgraceful fit of coughing. He had expected the same pepper-laced spirit they had drunk at dinner, but whether by mistake or out of misplaced swagger Putya had dropped his slivers of pepper into undiluted 90 degree spirit.

"Wonderful!" cried the director. "That's the stuff! Strong and a bouquet! I wouldn't say no to another."

So they repeated the dose and then the director, looking very well pleased, sat down again on his chair and began to chew the meat.

"Are you crazy?" Kungurtsev drew Putya aside. "He could croak."

"You don't understand a thing. That old man's made of steel. He'll outlive us all. That spirit, though—I'd got it ready for after our bathe. Shall we go in now?"

"Of course!" cried Kungurtsev happily.

He knew no joy greater than a bathe in the icy water of a mountain stream. But Putya was the only one who was willing to join him.

Putya ran off for towels, and Kungurtsev, who seemed to have regained his youth, turned to invite Bouryga whom he saw not far off, but thought better of it, seeing his glassy eyes and the powerful work of his jaws accomplishing the disappearance of a mighty sandwich consisting of a rissole pushed into a massive split roll. Another was in his hand, awaiting its turn.

"Old cinema men have an unwritten law." That was Lena's soft voice. "Leave nothing for the enemy. In other words, finish off every free meal you're offered."

Kungurtsev's smile was somewhat forced. Jokes like that jarred on his ear. Lena's green eyes sparkled. She needed to drink only a little and the admiring proselyte of the muses became another girl: observant, mocking, with a touch of malice. It wasn't difficult to guess what she would be like when the freshness of youth faded from her sharp features and adult life brought its inevitable disappointments. God grant you a good husband, girlie, Kungurtsev sincerely wished her—not aloud, of course.

"If your husband was so impossible, why didn't you leave him before?" Maria Petrovna was asking.

"How many women have you seen leaving

their husbands for nobody and nowhere?" Vera Dmitrievna replied. "And with a child, too, and a wretched sort of profession, secretary-typist."

"All the same, my dear—it's strange—"

"Nothing strange about it, I assure you."

In that rapid stream the water did not warm up in the course of the day, so in general it was better to bathe early, when the air held a sharp chill, when the grass was crisp with morning dew, instead of stepping into the ice-cold water from the warm sun-kissed grass of evening, when chill numbs the toes, rises to the heart and grips it—another moment and it will choke you. Kungurtsev and Putyatin, both naked, stood in the shallow water hugging themselves, shivering, regarding one another with desperation and hatred, because a witness is a preventive against retreat, against flight; then by tacit agreement, simultaneously, they dived in.

Stung by the cold, they almost lost consciousness and emerged numbed but happy, shouting and laughing. Their hearts were already fighting back, sending blood powerfully through the arteries, and every second brought added zest passing into coltish wildness. Two solid, middle-aged men acted up like village boys. "I'm going down to the bottom!" one announced and vanished with a flash of white buttocks. He knew the other would follow on the instant. The water was crystal clear, no need to shut their eyes.

They could see the yellow sand, the pebbles, the bubbles rising from springs along the river bed, the slanting shoal of small fry and an occasional big fish gleaming mirror-like. In the faintly green dimness they could see one another's bodies changing from bronze to bluish, according to the light, and now began a painful struggle: who could remain under the longest? Hearts seemed to stop beating, blood vessels grew brittle, ready to burst in a moment, but cursing one another's obstinacy, they stayed down until the water itself pushed them up to the surface. And as always, they emerged at the same instant. One would have thought this was enough to quench their ardour for that kind of contest, but after catching their breath, they started swimming under water for distance. They kept it up to the verge of cramps. But all of a sudden one abandoned the contest and with an appearance of great concentration started searching for something under the bank. At once the other began searching among the plants on cut-off clumps. The result of this search would be a slimy root or half rotten piece of wood. This object was flung into the middle of the river and after it with panicky howls went Romka. From the beginning of the river games he had remained, bored, on the bank, whining softly, but under strict prohibition against entering the water so long as his gods were enjoying their bathe. Now his hour had come. And his adored master

and the master's adored friend in turn flung him sticks, roots, twigs, and bits of wood of all kinds, trying to send them as far as possible, but not too far for Romka to see them. The dog could not guess that they were vying with one another again and he served each with equal zeal.

For the first time in their years of river jaunts, Kungurtsev felt that Putya was somehow slightly ahead of him. So far as iron health was concerned they were equal, Kungurtsev was slightly stronger, Putya slightly more agile, so on the whole they were level. But today Putya dived farther, and found more sticks, and threw them better. The lifting power of newly attached wings helped Putya, it was only a pity that they would melt before he reached the sun. And as they went back towards the camp, in wet shorts, without towelling themselves—this too was part of the ritual, like the mouthful of scorching spirit, Kungurtsev spoke out what was seething inside him.

"All the same—what's going to happen to Lipochka, Alyosha?"

"Don't," said Putya and his face drew up in wrinkles like that of a baby monkey. "Don't. Lipochka—that's my painful spot."

Kungurtsev said no more, disarmed by those pitiful words.

It was light along the river; a few fiery tongues from beyond the forest licked at the undersides of white clouds floating slowly

through a light blue sky. But higher up the bank, on the glade, the shadows of evening were thickening, the grass took on a deeper colour and the pines darkened. Far away, in the depths of the taiga, the August sunset lay threateningly crimson, lending no reflection to the dusky thicket.

The women cleaned the mushrooms, stripping off the slippery skin of the moist ones like stockings with their fingers, and scraping the dry-skinned mushrooms with knives. They put them in a ten-litre pot. There were also other kinds of mushrooms which they laid aside for some purpose of their own.

"Give me that bucket over there, dear," Maria Petrovna said.

"You keep on calling me 'dear'. Am I really so dear to you?" asked Vera Dmitrievna.

Kungurtsev was not feeling his usual self. The fresh, cold water, the wild male romp, the game with Romka, the dash and daring, had left him with a quiet, stinging melancholy, instead of the expected joy. Why it was so—whether it was his failure to have things out with Putya by the river, or something less evident which he himself did not understand, he could not have said, but whereas during their bathe he had thought that everything which mattered was saved, everything would sort itself out, now a different mood possessed him: nothing would sort itself out, nothing was saved.

His mood was only worsened by Putya's lack of understanding. Putya must have seen that his friend wasn't himself, but instead of tactfully adapting himself he began to show off by the campfire. He would dive into the thickets and return with mighty bundles of dry wood. The twigs scratched his naked skin but he never noticed, carried away by his own foolish excitement. He dragged up huge branches and trimmed the twigs with a small sharp hatchet so that the taiga rang with it. It all looked fine, and if he was trying to attract his wife's attention with his strength and skill he certainly succeeded. She put down her knife, took her paper apron off and went to Putya. And then Kungurtsev realised that all his troubled mood, his sense of discomfort came from this small, quiet woman with the tired eyes and sad mouth who made herself so inconspicuous yet spoiled everything.

Kungurtsev turned away and began to build the campfire.

Maria Petrovna came up.

"Are you daft? Get some clothes on."

"But Putya—?" It sounded quite childish.

"Putya's so heated up—he could go to the North Pole with no pants on."

"That's true," said Kungurtsev in a dying voice.

"What's the matter with you?" She looked carefully at her husband. "Do you envy him, or what?"

"What's there to envy?"

"Why not? A young wife. And you still stranded with your old trash."

"I wouldn't change with him."

"A fine thing that would be! But you do envy him all the same. Well, all right, get on with your work, we're late with the fire. I'll bring you your clothes."

Such concern was unlike Maria Petrovna; it touched him, and alerted him. He must be looking very wretched. And what was that silly joke about him envying Putya? Couldn't she see, couldn't she understand how alien this woman was to him?

Before disappearing entirely, the sun dying in the depths of the taiga shed a strange, mysterious light over everything. Trees the colour of old uncleaned bronze thrust their tops into a gilded bronze sky. In the bronze air, faces and clothes took on something of the same colour. And then—it was as though a switch had been snapped off. The thick darkness lasted for but an instant, then a low-hanging moon, barely rising over the earth, shed its pale light through the taiga, it pushed through a mist previously invisible and the glade was swathed in its silvery cloud.

In this pearly shimmer the slender figure of a girl in a white frock appeared and melted away. And dark patches, three of them, loomed through the mist and vanished again before their forms were clear.

Daughter and mother followed differing

tactics. The mature woman withdrew into herself, the small woman split the enemy camp, enslaving the three enraptured oafs. Clumsy, sluggish and obsessed, they tried with helpless outstretched hands to catch a white spectre, a ray of moonshine in the mist. Kungurtsev thoroughly pitied these youngsters whose hearts had awakened simultaneously, despite their difference in age.

Meanwhile, the campfire was refusing to blaze up. It smouldered, smoked and crackled, but its flames, instead of rising in a fine column, struggled meagrely through the damp wood.

"I always thought a campfire in the taiga was something magnificent," said the director in a damp, snuffling voice, moving closer to its feeble glow. "A Gothic cathedral of flame."

"A fire needs looking after," Kungurtsev answered, rather embarrassed.

"Like a woman?"

"And the most difficult of them."

The director's mild reproach shook Kungurtsev up. He rebuilt the fire, putting the drier wood below and the damp stuff on top, flung the thickest and wettest logs away to the side—their turn would come when the fire was a roaring blaze. It was strange—there had been practically no rain, the summer had in general been a dry one, yet the twigs were wet from the heavy dews. He pushed dry moss and old newspapers into the fire, then got down on hands and knees and turned him-

self into a human bellows. And languidly, reluctantly, after threatening to die out every moment, the fire did at last begin to burn up, then it really got going and sent up a column of flame into the sky, flinging out bursts of sparks that soared above the tree tops, vainly seeking to become stars. Kungurtsev added wood.

"A splendid fire," said the director gently. "Like in Cuba. Ah, Cuba!"

But Kungurtsev was still not satisfied. The thin dry twigs burned well, but he could see how weakly the flames licked at the thick logs. The wood smoked, charred and blackened, and at long last the fire did manage to plant a crimson butterfly on the rib of a log. It crawled along with quivering wings, slipped over to the bark, curled it into small grey rings and vanished. Then again the fire toiled a long, long time to perch another fire-butterfly on the log, and again its life was brief. For a fire to live, good dry wood is needed. It was time to stop Putya's useless Herculean labours, dragging up wind-torn branches that had rotted in the ground, and damp stuff that had lain in gullies.

With eager zest Putya set about the real work. Vera Dmitrievna offered to help. Kungurtsev picked up two buckets and went off to the river for water. Tea had to be made, and the mushrooms boiled lest they become wormy by tomorrow. When he came back the fire was roaring, a mountain of dry twigs rose

at the edge of the crimson-lighted circle and Putya, still bare to the waist, reddened by the flames and damp from sweat, was swinging an axe.

"Whether you like it or not, Pavel Leontyich, we'll have to fell a birch," he said, his mouth twisted in concern. "All this dry stuff burns like husks, however much we get it won't last the night out."

"Who'll give you permission to fell a living tree?" cried Kungurtsev, aghast.

"You, Pasha, you're the king and god of these blessed parts."

"Don't you try flattery. It won't work."

"And don't you try pretending. Look at all these fresh stumps. Better give the forester hell, he'll fell the whole taiga for vodka."

Kungurtsev could see that Putya badly wanted to fell a big tree, and not only for the sake of the fire. At no other time would he have allowed it, although the factory people vandalised the forest as much as they wanted. But now, at this moment, a refusal seemed petty.

"Have it your own way. Only choose a dead one."

"Anything else?" said Putya with instantly recovered brashness and strode away out of the firelight.

Vera Dmitrievna followed him.

Soon the blows of an axe were heard, then the rustle and sharp crack of a falling tree. The noise swelled threateningly, it

approached—it seemed as though the tree would fall right here, on the campfire and those sitting round it. But no, it had fallen somewhere out in the dense darkness, it was only the wind of its falling that swept the flames aside. And in that instant the darkness became still denser, embracing glade and forest. It was incomprehensible how the children could run about among bushes and trees without breaking their necks, or putting their eyes out. One might well think that like bats, they were equipped with sense radar. All the same, it gave one a shudder when after appearing for a moment in the firelight they plunged again into the dark thickets. And somehow or other, in this wild running, the youngest Kungurtsev found time to suggest to Olga that they run away to the BAM construction, and she to tattle to her mother.

Vera Dmitrievna in her turn told Kungurtsev when she and Putya dragged the felled birch to the fire. Of course, it wasn't a dry, dead tree as he had suggested but a live one, although old. Now he set to work trimming off the branches with the same verve and dash which had characterised all his actions that day. Vera Dmitrievna had lured Putya into her time, which was not the time of Kungurtsev, the time of Lipochka and of the former Putya himself. Now he was younger than any of them by a whole generation, and this was yet one more sin laid to the account of Vera Dmitrievna.

It was the first time Vera Dmitrievna had addressed Kungurtsev all that day and it could have been taken as an attempt at friendliness. But he was not ready for it and only enquired with faint interest what Olga had replied to his "dolt". The word held a hint of irritation, either missed or ignored by Vera Dmitrievna. Olga had said she'd promised his elder brother. And again Kungurtsev found no apt reply or joke.

"A dangerous family, yours—" he began but pulled himself up, switched over to the "younger generation" theme, then felt ashamed of his tedious, inappropriate moralising and stopped.

They drank tea out of the huge aluminium kettle and Maria Petrovna, summoning all the strength of her character as though preparing for a difficult operation, sent her rowdy boys and Olya into the tent. Lena had already gone in, and Bouryga, nodding sleepily, still earlier. The director, learning that Kungurtsev would spend the night by the fire, decided to keep him company, and it was impossible to shake his determination.

"It's warmer here than in the tent," he said, "towards morning we can scatter the embers over the ground, spread a canvas sheet and sleep on it wonderfully for an hour or two. An old man oughtn't to sleep very much."

"Have you slept like that before?" Kungurtsev marvelled.

"Yes. Many a time. The first time was on

Ryn-sands, the nights are very cold indeed there."

Kungurtsev had been hoping that Vera Dmitrievna would go into the tent and Putya would join him by the fire, but he was out of luck again. After bringing up a mountain of dry twigs and a pile of logs, enough to last through the night, Putya finally put on the rest of his clothes and went off with his wife to the other bank to sleep in the car. Romka followed.

A great loneliness enveloped Kungurtsev. He tried to think of the coming morning, when there would be the sunrise, and the diamonds of dew steaming in the early warmth, and the first bathe with Putya, and the glass of scorching spirit; there would be mushrooms fried with onions and other kinds boiled with vinegar, and the boys' wild games, and there would be this old man, quite unlike anyone else, who had seen so much in his life and whom he was already coming to love. But somehow, none of these thoughts brought any comfort, let alone joy. The sense of loss had not blunted, it had bored firmly into him.

A strange headless creature with patched back and hindquarters bounded out of the forest and in the firelight acquired complete physical form as a wet, softly whining Romka; the silvery fur on his flanks, belly and paws had an almost phosphorescent gleam while the chocolate patches merged with the darkness of the night.

"Romka!" Kungurtsev called softly.

The dog crouched and humbly, in a manner far from consistent with his dignity, crawled to Kungurtsev and started licking his hand with a warm tongue.

"Driven you away, have they?" Kungurtsev guessed. "Poor old fellow..."

Now, could such a thing have ever happened before? Putya had often slept in the car with Lipochka, but Romka had always shared their bed. They would laughingly tell later how the dog, heavy with sleep, rolled over them in the night. Putya called these nights "Morpheus in hell". But of course, the new Madam Putyatina wasn't going to have a wet, smelly Romka in the car with them. And then, after all, they're newlyweds, Kungurtsev thought glumly.

Romka was shivering with cold and injured feelings. He never noticed that the side of his fur turned towards the fire was steaming and crackling from the sparks. Kungurtsev threw a corner of the canvas over him and drew the bony shivering body close.

"Never mind, Romka, never mind, boy, we'll do without them. Go to sleep, boy, and dream of hares."

"The driver, your friend—" The director's weak voice seemed to come from some infinite distance. "Why is he so happy—and so unhappy?"

Kungurtsev was silent, not sure whether to reply to this question. But the Siberian respect for age triumphed.

"Probably because you can't build your own happiness on the unhappiness of others."

"Why, what do you mean?" The voice was still distant and very calm. "That's all we ever do. Happiness not born in loss to another simply doesn't exist. While you are embracing one woman another may be weeping into her pillow and you know nothing of it. It's so obvious—" he added almost apologetically.

Kungurtsev was silent and the director suddenly lost all desire to convince him of anything. For some reason he again remembered Dominguin and the cushions tossed down into the blood-stained arena.

"Listen," he said, "have you ever wondered why the terrible wounds of matadors—and the horn usually pierces the groin—never seem to cause a loss of male potency?"

"To tell the truth, I haven't."

Well, all right, thought the director, everything was more or less all right with the matadors. And he was all right, too. He would live forever. He would make this film about Siberia and a dozen, a hundred more, he would make a film about the Golden Age of man. He would receive a multitude of the highest awards, all sort of prizes and cups. But one thing he would never again see—his mother's dry little hands so much like his own—only for his own hands he felt no love. And he said—to whom he did not know, but firmly sure that he was heard, "If there's but one

chance in a million that I shall see my mother, you can take your stinking immortality. And at once!"

Putyatin started the engine, closed the windows and switched on the heater. In fifteen or twenty minutes it would be warm in the car and they could undress. He took the bedding from the boot and let down the backs of the front seats.

Mist swathed the meadow. It stirred, swirled, wove its pallid strands in and out, and cold pale sparks moved vaguely in it. It had swallowed the river and the bushes alongside, it had covered the farther, high bank so that only the tops of the firs stood out against the thick darkness of the sky and the yellow gleam of fading stars. The mist flowed over the meadow, in a moment it would blanket the car, and fill all space with its surging, unstable substance.

Putyatin lighted a cigarette, drew deeply on it several times, passed his hand over the misted glass and saw that his wife had gone to bed without waiting for the car to get properly warm. He stubbed out his cigarette, undressed, tossed his clothes into the boot and climbed in.

"Oh, how cold and wet you are!" said Vera Dmitrievna, but she did not move away, she pressed her whole weak body close to him.

He wrapped his arms round her and kissed her greedily, only now realising how he had

been wanting her through all the long day which had separated them. And all the vague, complex, sometimes tormenting feeling that had overcome him no matter how strongly he sought to control it now fell away like the scab from a long-healed wound, leaving only the truth of love, intimacy and happiness.

It was getting hot inside the car. He switched off the engine, let down a side window a little and lighted a cigarette. The smoke drifted out, and corkscrewed in a blue spiral into the milky mist. Then he lay down again beside his wife, and again, as he often had, marvelled at her quietness. While he twisted and turned, looked for cigarettes and matches, lighted one, shut the window and lay down again she had never stirred. In general, she reduced her movements and gestures to a minimum, so that other people round about her seemed jerkily fussy, like figures in the old silent films. But what lay behind that stillness—discipline, superfluous restraint or awkwardness forced upon her by a difficult life and constant self-control—this he did not know; he had still barely touched her inner being.

"A good woman, your first wife must be," she said. Putyatin was not sure whether it was a question or an assertion.

"Of course she is!" For some reason there was a certain heat in his voice and he hastened to atone for it with conciliation. "And very helpful for those around."

"I understand. I'm not nearly so helpful.

Your friends will find it hard to accept me."

There was no sense of injury in all this, still less a desire to drive a wedge between him and the Kungurtsevs, least of all jealousy of the woman who had lost. She wanted to digest the day spent with his friends, and even showed an indirect assurance that they would have to accept her in the end. She did not want to deprive her husband of this friendship, but she had no illusions, she looked seriously and soberly into the future.

"You mustn't think—" Putyatin began. "They're fine people. Really fine and good, you can always rely on them."

"I know. Although they too aren't as easy to get on with as your former wife. In general, there aren't many easy people. But there are still fewer real friends, and one mustn't lose them. Now I, for instance—I've never had friends. Except when I was a child."

"But your daughter? Isn't she a friend to you?"

"No." She spoke with that dreadful simplicity which attracted and frightened him. "She loves me in her own way, but all her friendship was for her father."

"But didn't she see—?"

"She saw everything. Well, not everything, of course, but a lot and that helped him. Her unhappy, sinful father, not really understood by anybody and ruined by the callousness all round. And then, you know, he was very handsome, and his sins stood him in good

stead. He had brilliant eyes like precious stones, and nervous, sudden yet graceful movements. He was always animated, enthusiastic and gave the impression of a man sincere to the last word and movement. And yet he lied the whole time, from the first day of our life together. I think a lot can be forgiven, but not lying. He was firm and consistent only in his lying, that stupefying, maddening lying. He was a fanatic in lying, he would sooner have gone to the stake than confessed to his lies. It was a kind of inside-out principle."

"But didn't Olga herself decide who she wanted to be with?"

"Yes. I think she obeyed an instinct of self-preservation. And then there was your car."

"Oh, drop it!"

"I'm quite serious. She's just a girl. Young. An ambitious, foolish, feather-headed girl. She looks older than her years but she's just a child. You've no idea how all this flatters her vanity—the car, the dog, and your fine guns."

"You aren't being fair to her."

"Why not? After all, it's quite natural. She never had any good toys. But that isn't the important thing. I haven't any great belief in various educational methods, but I do believe in the charm of the personality, let's call it that. And I hope she'll be able to appreciate the owner of all these desirable possessions."

"I don't know how to handle children—"

"You don't need to know. You aren't obliged to handle her at all, heaven forbid. Just be yourself."

How much prejudice there is in relations between people, thought Putyatin, and how little desire to penetrate to the real essence of another. Even the Kungurtsevs, the people closest to him, had made up their minds about Vera before they ever saw her. And whatever she might do, it wouldn't thaw the ice. And it was to her credit that she hadn't tried to make up to them, she'd just remained herself, and without the faintest hint of challenge. If anyone had tried to wheedle the Kungurtsevs, he was the one. But perhaps his mistake was different—perhaps he oughtn't to have forced Vera on them at all? After all, Lipochka was their friend too, what right had he to decide for everyone? No, don't pretend, he told himself. When Lipochka left for Tomsk it wasn't the Kungurtsevs she was thinking about. With Kungurtsev, though—that's another matter. He's devoted to his Maria Petrovna, but actually, he doesn't need a wife who's an important figure outside her home—he needs a good housewife. It's the comfortable gifts of a homemaker that he values in a woman. He hates to go visiting, and loves to have guests in his own home; he's hospitable, generous, expansive—in fact, on a scale only Lipochka could attain. He thinks he misses Lipoch-

ka, but what he really misses is her buns.

"Look, can't you cook at all?" he asked, and caught himself up rather belatedly with the remembrance that his wife could not have followed his thoughts and the sudden question might strike her as strange, to say the least.

"That depends on what you mean by cooking. I can make soup, of course, and rissoles, but all the special things—where would I learn to cook them? You can't have any idea of how we lived."

Not for the first time he found that Vera Dmitrievna could never be taken aback. She always answered readily, with no trace of surprise or protest at the twists of another's thought. He could not explain it, but ascribed all this to the inner constriction which never allowed her to relax, to melt away into her own mist. She had had to answer for much, she was always tautly collected like a soldier before a battle. My poor dear little soldier, thought Putyatin, swallowing a lump in his throat.

"I can make an omelette offensée," she said in an unusually low voice.

"Wha-at?"

"Omelette offensée."

"What on earth's that?"

"An omelette with vegetables, mushrooms and pork fat."

"Where did you learn that?"

"A woman I worked with taught me. She'd been to France on an exchange student arrange-

ment. She spent a whole year there and every day she made omelette offensée. Cheap and nourishing."

You won't win Pasha over with the offensée, Putyatin thought glumly, but aloud he asked, "Will you make it for us?"

"Of course."

Carefully, as though everything round her were made of glass, she turned to her husband and tenderly, firmly kissed him on the lips.

Never had he been so penetratingly close to a woman. It was not pleasure, it was something else, an exquisite torment equally impossible to prolong or stop, and then a collapse, a languid fall and a coming to in a tingling emptiness.

It was hot, damp and stuffy. He moved away from Vera, slid over to his own side, by the car window. The misted glass breathed coolness. He imagined Vera wanted to embrace him and his cooled body twitched in a cramp of protest. Any touch of a woman would have been unbearable. But she did not touch him, only pulled the sheet up over herself and apparently fell asleep at once.

The mist pasted silver foil over the car windows. Beyond the mist, beyond the great night that stretched for thousands of kilometres, slept Lipochka whom he had driven away—or more likely tossed sleepless. So big and strong, so full of warmth and kindness, ready to sacrifice herself for all who entered the great circle of her benevolence, and now

suddenly lonely, abandoned, needed by none. No, she was probably needed by her recently widowed sister, but could this ever be enough to fill Lipochka's heart? Absolutely, utterly blameless—and yet suddenly deprived of everything which had given meaning to her life, the man she devotedly loved, her home, her friends. And was it an easy thing to start life anew, turned fifty? Putyatin sobbed and then froze, fearful. But Vera was asleep, her breathing deep and regular. Now he no longer held back his tears. He wept softly and begged forgiveness of Lipochka, and thanked the Kungurtsevs for not accepting Vera. He had no right to judge them with cheap cynicism, he should bow low before them for their faithfulness to Lipochka, and to his own past.

Ah, if that past could but return. He knew this was impossible and grieved, and wept, and with wet face dropped into that shallow, transparent sleep when surroundings do not vanish, but are swathed in a thin veil of dreams and you do not even know you are asleep. You are conscious of yourself, the position of your body, the feel of your bed, all the smells and sounds, but your closed eyes are turned not upon the outer world but the inner one, the floating forms of dreams. He knew he was lying in the cramped car, he could feel beneath him the hump where the collapsed back of the front seat met the back seat, he could hear the river rumbling over the boulders, he could hear the breathing

of the woman beside him and flung his arm over her shoulder. And in the first instant he was not surprised to feel Lipochka's plump shoulder beneath his hand—Lipochka, for whom he had been weeping. Then doubts crept up, it was unbelievable but his hand could not be mistaken, what lay beneath it was so long familiar. There were the two smallpox marks, each the size of a three-kopeck piece, which he could never confuse with any other. He caught the scent of her dry warm skin. It was incredible, inconceivable, but she had come back, ejected the chance intruder and taken her place beside him. Forever. And then in fright and despair he cried out, wanted to jump up but struck his head and fell back.

"What's the matter? Now, now—it's all right," he heard an alarmed voice.

He could not understand whose it was; stretching out awkwardly, his feet braced against the dashboard, his head against the back of the seat, his body curved uncomfortably, he glared into the darkness and groaned piteously.

"It's all right, dear. It's me, me, Vera."

"Is it really you? Ugh, heavens." He breathed out the last of his fright.

"Was it a frightening dream?"

"Couldn't be worse," he mumbled.

THE BEAUTIFUL HORSE

I saw her several times, or rather, set eyes on her, without actually registering the fact, as we tend to in our daily lives to defend our brittle consciousness from the overwhelming abundance of impressions. There was something unaccounted for in the space around the holiday home; not a tree, or a bush, or a vehicle, or a guest, or a land surveyor with a theodolite; it was a small compact form filtering through the chilly morning mist and hovering like a patch of darkness in the early November twilight. For someone only vaguely aware of it, first of all this "unauthorised" thing was "located" in the holiday home's grounds and then it required other verbs to describe its movements: it "appeared" and "disappeared", and finally with the grand verb "lived" rose to the ranks of animate creatures: in our grounds, now arising from the light,

now plunging into darkness, there lived a horse.

However, I've gone ahead too far and left something out: the horse came later; first there was the spectre of a horse. Yes, we discovered that there was a horse's spectre roaming the vast and nearly virginal grounds around the holiday home, which had been separated from the forest, river and fields in a rather uncertain manner which did not inspire confidence.

In any other place such a discovery would have caused alarm but not in this holiday home near Moscow, which was the strangest of all the establishments I had encountered in my long life.

There was ambiguity at the very base of this "holiday home-cum-sanatorium" for nobody could tell whether the function of this massive affair, which had appeared not so long ago on the edge of an old manor's grounds, was to improve or wreck the health of its inmates. Some came here just for a holiday and with the undisguised intention of "living it up", while others came here for health reasons and with the vague hope of being revived both in body and in soul here. And so in this temple of health there was a party going on day and night, the sounds of merrymaking blared out, and the thick woods which came right up to the house's windows, served as a refuge for amorous fun and games.

Various mysterious beings appeared from the forest. One morning the thin cover of

pure white snow which has fallen overnight was speckled with numerous tiny tracks which could not possibly be attributed to the usual animals of the Moscow region—foxes, hares, boars and weasels. A clue was given by one of the women guests with a creative imagination. Suffering from insomnia, she rose at dawn, and when she drew back the curtain, it seemed to her that a royal cloak was covering the ground. This image suggested the answer to the riddle: some ermine had been near the house—the furs of these animals, which are white and have black tails, were once used to make royal gowns.

Another time the shadow of a huge stag went crashing along the moonlit forest edge. Although the beast was most likely an elk, nobody actually saw anything but the speeding shadow flashing past the pallid moonlit clearings and conifers.

The old estate had a mystical effect on the locality: the dense park, the dark lime alleys, the peeling yellow palace with a white-columned portico, the old cemetery and the pink Baroque Church of the Consolation of All Afflicted with an empire-style belfry. In the cemetery at night little blue lights flickered among the lace-patterned metallic crosses over the graves of the ladies-in-waiting of Empress Elizabeth and courtiers of Catherine I. Rumour had it that after leaving their cramped resting-places, the restive souls of the revelling Empress's ladies-in-waiting were

now flirting with those of the gallant courtiers from the most amorous of all royal households.

The feeling that something amazing was about to occur was ever-present in the volatile late autumn air, first stiff, dry and cold in the early mornings, then sweet-smelling and sun-caressed like in summer, and then dank and saturated with slimy moisture. And so when the spectre of a horse appeared, it fitted naturally into the landscape which favoured this moonlit tempest of shadows and flashing of other-worldly lights.

Now, however, I consider that the horse's authenticity was denied not so much on account of the mystical atmosphere as on account of the general penchant for decorum. Our holiday home was notably tolerant towards animals. There were lots of cats inside and dogs outside. However, cats are small creatures, and clearly have a social function and thus often live in establishments on a semi-legal footing, even breeding there; stray dogs may be found at public feeding places until someone notices them—something that usually happens during rowdy wedding parties—and then they are turned over to the dog-catchers to be shot. But a loose horse which belonged to nobody, a sort of solitary, independent Houyhnhnm, that was beyond the grasp of a law-abiding Yahoo. That's why it was easier to think of it as a spectre than as a creature of flesh and blood. Even so, the day came when the enigmatic horse's out-

line gained three dimensions, clear life-like colours, the agitated small movements of a creature of flesh, constantly adapting itself to its surroundings, and we had to stop deceiving ourselves: there was a free horse roaming about nearby.

I have loved horses ever since my early childhood: I grew up in a large Moscow yard with wine cellars where long-maned draught horses used to bring cartloads of barrels; then I recall guarding herds of horses at night in some fields near Ryazan alongside the famous apple orchards; and then there were the dashing Moscow draymen who used to race retired trotters down the winding streets... But how seldom I now get a chance to see a horse! And just then it seemed as though this one had come from the days of my childhood but something incomprehensible was preventing me from getting near her.

Her loneliness was a barrier which I dared not overcome. At a reverential distance I would watch her unhurriedly and intently cropping the autumn grass where it was mostly brown with only a few live green strands here and there, and where it was emerald-green, sweet and lush, or standing still and dozing or slowly wandering off somewhere, swishing away the tedious autumn flies with her rather short tail.

Sometimes in the fiery black sunsets or crimson-tinged morning mists the simple drayhorse turned into a huge fairy-tale steed

with the perfect proportions of a statue, just as ready to race off at a fierce gallop as to obey its armour-clad rider about to attack an enemy, as to soar up to the stars with a valiant fairy-tale hero on her back...

And then I started getting closer to her. Slowly, in fits and starts, but surely the day came when at the turn of a footpath I found myself nearer to the horse which was busy with the time-consuming task of sating herself and discreetly detached from the world around.

And then she stepped out of the background of the landscape and began grazing alongside the track leading to the old estate, church and cemetery. And I found myself so close to her that I caught the faint scent of her damp coat. This wild creature was unusually well-groomed: her tail was cut short and combed and so were her thick mane and fringe. Splashed with morning dew, her hooves were filed and unshod. She had been groomed with a curry comb and her crupper shone sleekly. Washed clean and staring straight at me, her full, spherical, dark-lilac eye absorbed everything in its transparent clouded depths—all the space around including my tiny figure in the foreground. The world reflected in her large, deep and kind pupil looked beautiful and meaningful while the other was a wall-eye, lustreless and bluish, reflecting nothing, staring blankly into space. Once in a while she would strongly blink her

good eye but she could not do anything to protect her blind eye even when a blade of grass got stuck to it or a fly started beating against the mollusc-like blob under her thick grey-tipped eyelashes.

However, oddly enough, instead of marring her, the wall-eye gave her dignity. This natural impediment did not prevent her from fulfilling her purpose in life; she had worked hard in her time and was now being rewarded with this freedom.

She was no ordinary village horse. I could tell she had breeding, although I do not know what bloods had been mixed to create such a lovely creature. Her forbears had definitely been drays: from them she had inherited her massive chest and crupper, sturdy legs, shaggy fetlocks and broad, unsagging back. But drays did not come that small. Short and undersized, she looked like a cross between a dray and a pony. However, such a combination was impossible, just as was one between a Saint Bernard and a lapdog. Power and petiteness were blended in her in an exceptionally harmonious manner, and she was a beautiful rich bay.

Just then a large ginger dog with a dark face noticed her and decided to curry favour with its patrons. After all, the appearance of a roaming horse near the front entrance to the main building was an obvious breach of decorum. It ran up to the horse and started barking in a business-like fashion. The horse

went on serenely nibbling the grass. Then it started barking louder and more ferociously, snarling and baring its yellow teeth. It gradually wound itself up but the horse, which had seen so much with her single eye in her long life, attached no importance whatsoever to its show of temper. Her imperturbability puzzled it and it stopped barking and wagged its tail a few times, as though apologizing to someone for messing up its performance. Then suddenly it noticed it was being watched and its hackles went up and it started barking in a high-pitched tone and ran up from behind and tried to nip the horse's leg. The latter could not see it because it had gone round the side of her blind eye. Then, after a moment's thought, she guessed its whereabouts, turned and with the characteristic precision with which she did everything, she lashed out with her hind legs. The dog would have been a goner if she had hit it but she had no intention of doing it any harm. So then it decided to pretend to be an alert, brave guard dog and the horse unwillingly but conscientiously played along with it. In the respites between skirmishes she went on cropping the grass, and quietly moving away from the holiday home. Eventually the dog considered its mission complete, barked another couple of times and then trotted off jauntily towards the pack to recount its victory.

My admiration for the horse grew even more. She had been involved in a silly, annoy-

ing episode but come out of it with flying colours...

Emerging from the mysterious distance, she became an ordinary munching, snorting horse but her enigmatic aura remained. Who did she belong to and why was she wandering about on her own, without the usual surveillance or restrictions placed on anyone connected with civilisation, be it man or animal, and where did she go to at night, when and where did she come back from?..

A few of the guests tried to strike up a closer relationship with her but she would not stand familiarity, and refused to take sugar or brown bread from a palm, quietly enjoying the autumn grass. Long years spent near people had taught her wise caution. Unlike the silly trusting dogs she knew that the self-appointed Custodians of Order kept a strict eye on the way in which the state goods were being distributed, counting every bit which was going astray. What she did not understand was that her very lack of restrictions was a challenge to law and order.

The background noises in our small world were rich and varied: low rumbling voices, pattering steps, banging doors, water splashing in the pool, glasses jingling in the bar, billiard balls clinking and a tennis ball thudding, music, shots from a film on TV, a peel of thunder through the crack in the door of the cinema hall, the sharply cut-off but lingering echo of a snippet of a song, laughter, calls...

Even a brief patch of silence was also punctuated with a high-pitched pure sound which again absorbed rumblings, rustlings, whispers and shrieks... You could catch separate words and phrases in the chaos of sounds. More and more often you could make out the word "horse", "horse", "horse". The guests' idle, tenacious attention had fixed itself on the vagrant horse. Well-meaning, warmly surprised, it still caused me alarm. The friendly chorus was interjected with mumbles of:

"It's not allowed..."

"But maybe it's being searched for?.."

"But what if it's sick?.."

"...foot-and-mouth disease, glanders, rabies..."

"It's got a bad eye..."

"A wall-eye? But what if it's a trachoma?.."

"If every old nag..."

"...there wouldn't be enough grass..."

And then I noticed that the cat droppings had vanished from the huge upper hall which the guests never sat in and which I used to cross on my way to the canteen, and I realised the cats must have been wiped out... And soon the stillness and emptiness outside the entrance doors accounted for another loss: gone too were the friendly, ever-famished stray dogs which had come running over here at meal times in the hope of getting tidbits. They had been caught expertly when nobody was about. The thought struck me that someone not entirely bad was buying the homeless

horse's life with these paltry gestures. The same thought, as it turned out later, had flashed through many other people's minds. And when the horse suddenly disappeared, everyone started saying at once that she had been shot on the instigation of some ubiquitous bastard.

However, she returned—and not alone. With her came a forester, a hale, weather-beaten, quite elderly man in a green forester's uniform, peaked cap with a badge and gum-boots rolled down under his knees. He had ginger-grey hair, freckles and a grey moustache, stained yellow from tobacco. His deep-set, clear green eyes, which were screwed up slightly from being constantly in danger of being hurt by branches and twigs, had a kind twinkle. He struck one as a tough working man, who was reliable through and through, and who had devoted many a year to doing good and to upholding a positive outlook on life which he had evidently succeeded in demanding justice from.

"Why, of course not!" he said derisively (I overheard him in the middle of a conversation with some guests). "Who would let her be shot? Who's Marusya harming anyway?"

Swinging his arm back, he stroked the horse's firm slanting cheek. She was standing behind him, nuzzling his back with her head and inhaling his familiar scent.

"Nearly twenty years she and I have slogged away together. And now she can walk

about—she deserves a lifelong holiday now."

"And it's all right she's, well, wandering about like this?" someone asked.

The forester did not answer at once, and his smile grew slightly tenser: he wanted to understand what lay behind the question—anxiety for the horse or disapproval of Marusya's freedom of movement. Faith in people's kind intentions got the upper hand and he said with a chuckle:

"Who'd do her any harm? Who'd hurt an old horse that deserves a rest?.. Marusya's clever and well-mannered and she'd never go anywhere she weren't meant to, and she's clean and no trouble at all."

"Well, make sure you look after her!" urged a round-faced old woman with an army badge on her woollen cardigan.

"Of course I will! Besides each other, she and I have got nobody else in the world. Except the elks and boars, that is!" replied the forester very cheerfully. "Come on," he said to Marusya. "The folks here need to rest."

"Do let her come and see us though, won't you," asked the old woman with the army badge.

"I'll let her out to graze!" laughed the old man, saluted and strode off into his wood with Marusya sauntering along behind.

This conversation with the forester cheered everyone up, and nobody noticed that old Marusya was protected from fate merely by

the thin mantle of the forester's kindness, and not by the Law. There's no law to protect beautiful old horses... And nobody took any notice of the lorry going into the wood past the main building a couple of days after the reassuring talk. There was a militiaman sitting next to the driver and two young men with wide bored faces in the back. Nobody attached any significance to the muffled sound of a shot which rang out in the dank air. But when the lorry came rumbling back many people spotted the four thick brown sticks poking out of the back. They weren't sticks—they were the shot horse's legs.

And then the bells of the Church of the Consolation of All Afflicted, which had long since been removed, started tolling, and telling the world in vibrant tones of the evil deed which had been committed. And nobody would believe the know-all who kept insisting this peculiar droning was from the dairy which was stepping up its work. There really was a dairy on the other side of the gully but how come you could not hear it on other days?..

How feeble goodness is and how effective evil is! The good old forester had been unable to defend his beautiful horse. The kind-hearted people from the holiday home shirked facing up to the venomous "somebody", the "spot" as the writer Leskov called bearers of evil who were invisible and destructive like the bacteria of infectious diseases.

But is it worth kicking up a fuss over some half-blind old horse?—a reasonable person might ask. But she was a beautiful horse... And then the future worries me. Remember what happened in Ray Bradbury's book during the Golden Age of civilisation due to a butterfly's wing which had been damaged in prehistoric times? And this wasn't a butterfly's wing but a Horse, a Beautiful Horse which had been destroyed quite deliberately. What if in a million years' time the Earth was to split apart because of this? The Earth inhabited by better people than us?

Well, nobody looks that far ahead.

But we should...

ENVOY FROM A MYSTERIOUS LAND

Sergeyev was returning from a club in Science Town, some fifteen kilometres distance from his country place. No one driving a car was going his way, so they sent him home in the club bus, the size of an ordinary city passenger bus. The empty vehicle rumbled, jolting up and down over the bumps and pot-holes on the asphalt, and swaying from side to side like a boat in a stormy sea. When they reached the turn-off to the writers' settlement, Sergeyev asked the driver to stop. He wanted to return home in a more modest way, without all the clatter which this clumsy bus would inevitably produce making a U-turn in the narrow, quiet, green blind alley, the smell of exhaust fumes, the scraping and breaking of the branches of the slender birches and bird-cherries that were white with a belated blossoming.

Besides, he wanted to collect his thoughts

after three hours of answering eager questions about all the mysteries of the universe, about past, present and future, as if a miserable scribbler really possessed knowledge denied other mortals; after being tormented with burning moral problems and stark intrusion into his private life by all those people so strangely confident of their unquestionable right to do so.

That day's literary gathering was no different from any other of its kind. Yet, with every succeeding occasion, Sergeyev was aware of an ever stronger sensation of something morbid in the curiosity with which the readers-cum-spectators indulged in that game of question and answer. "Allow me to enjoy your splendid talent, but spare me contact with your unattractive personality," these words of the famous Grimm, addressed to Jean Jacques Rousseau, gave a perfect definition of what the natural relation between a writer and a reader should be, Sergeyev thought.

A writer has no business to declaim and act, he must do his sacred job in silence and solitude and deliver for the people's judgement only the results achieved, and not the sight of his sagging paunch and his lined face, his stammering and his dubious witticisms.

But there was still another reason for Sergeyev's inner disturbance—the question about his opinion of the present-day youth. Not that there was anything new about that

question; as a rule it was preceded by some flattering words about Sergeyev's service to the people in helping to preserve for posterity the image of the Moscow children of the 'twenties and 'thirties and of the pre-war youth, and then would come the query—why did the characters in his books never include present-day young people? Usually he avoided giving any direct answers, trying to deceive not so much his listeners as himself. But that day he had said bluntly: "Because I do not know present-day youth." And this truthful answer still irked him.

When he got off the bus it grew dark all of a sudden, which was strange for the time of the year; usually in June the days fade out gradually, and it is still fairly light even after ten in the evening, when the sun has long since set and the shadows on the earth grow dense, merging into one dark mass, but the sky remains glassily light and the swallows, putting their trust in that light, flash to and fro high up, though they really should long ago be sleeping in their nests. That day the sky must have been overcast and nothing prevented the gathering dusk from reigning supreme.

Sergeyev walked along the barely discernible highway, first skirting a factory settlement, then crossing a field, drowned in darkness and only announcing itself by a breath of fresh air.

In his thoughts he tried to determine when

he himself had lost his youth and become a man of a different epoch. Actually he had remained young for a rather long time, partly because of the war, which, while cutting short the youth of some, prolonged the youth of others. He was twenty-four when he came back from the front and began everything from the beginning: college, student worries, student shortage of funds, and student carefree existence. Together with the other ex-soldiers turned students, he shared the youth of the generation of eighteen-year-olds who were untouched by the war. Soon enough he felt himself quite at home in that alien world, so long as he did not drag war reminiscences there. It was not something everybody could or would do, but he managed. His reckless post-war life was a young man's life: pain, sorrow, bitter and cruel experience all receded before the unspent, avid forces preserved in him. He loved, read a lot, studied well and shirked no work that came his way. Everything to the uttermost, and yet he did not exhaust himself, but seemed to grow stronger and more complete. Then literature opened its realm and with it the new, strange and inescapable youth, which stays so lastingly with the novices in that art. Want to remain young till your old age—become a writer! But seriously?.. The feeling of a still glowing youth was kept alive in him by his prolonged preoccupation with the past. He zealously tugged into the present all the by-streets and

all the echoing Moscow courtyards of his childhood, the rainy summers in the countryside, and all the beloved images; in this way, unbeknown to himself, he lived a kind of artificial double life where, through the watery outlines of the present, the contours of the past stood out clearly and vividly. Something like when you inadvertently end up with two pictures on the same piece of film. His writing was not of the memoirs type, because that would have retained the sense of distance, and, therefore, the sense of age lapse. No, he lived in that illusory world taking it for real, he lived fully involved in former relationships, passions, indignation, joys, never allowing himself to become an adult. At times it seemed that this illusory world coincided with the world of the present-day youth, but then he realised that his works, as he himself, were of interest only to the ageing members of his own generation and that for "today's young" he had long been a fossil, and the songs of his heart—like a collection of long-forgotten Russian romances.

Lately, the sounds and currents of that strange world reached Sergeyev ever more often, getting through to his seemingly constant and unchangeable order of life. Incomprehensible slang jarred on his ear; the indifferent yet all-seeing glances, staring and distant at the same time, seared his face with their pitiless alienation; that alien life evoked a strange confusion in him, he was afraid of

it, and, not admitting it even to himself, hastened to take shelter in the old familiar world where he could quietly live out his life. What a disgusting phrase! And, trying to ward it off, Sergeyev accused "today's young" of being the usurpers of the wonderful land of youth, the land that had been for ever and ever entrusted to his generation and had just been perfidiously spirited away from them while the weary soldiers dozed off.

"I do not know the present-day youth and do not want to know them!" he said out loud, slackening his pace.

"Goodness! What a fright you gave me!" a faintly familiar, clear, though no longer young feminine voice sounded somewhere near Sergeyev. The voice was well controlled and yet, despite the prearranged modulations, it betrayed the fact that its owner feared neither God nor the devil.

It turned out to be exactly so—the voice belonged to Sergeyev's neighbour, the widow of a recently deceased old novelist.

"What gave you such a fright?" Sergeyev asked in the faint hope that her put-on fear was not provoked by his loud-spoken declaration, ridiculous in the nocturnal stillness.

The woman approached and the darkness failed to hide her gaunt face, with faded flesh slipping down the scull bones, and the deeply sunken big eyes smouldering in an unfriendly glow. After the death of her husband she had aged noticeably and quickly. It seemed as if

she had had one aim in life—to preserve the remains of her rare beauty till his death and then discard the worn-out mask and with complete disdain present to the world a hopelessly old, dilapidated image. The dead man had carried along to his grave the last traces of her beauty; she had returned from the cemetery a Shakespearean witch.

A long time ago, in the pre-war years, she had worked as a waitress at the Journalists' Club and was called Fenya. But the young girl who had come to Moscow from the backwoods of Tambov soon realised that a common name like that wouldn't help make a career in the capital, and, as often happened in those days, she went to the other extreme. To all who sought her friendship, and there was no lack of those, she held out a firm, straight palm and blurted out with wide open eyes: "Flora," adding afterwards, "there is such a flower, you know."

It was then that a far from young writer of war memoirs, a former participant in the Civil War, decorated with the order of the Red Banner—which, as the custom of the years of the Revolution demanded, he wore on a round red piece of cloth—fell in love with Fenya-Flora and made her his wife. In the hot-house atmosphere of his love she blossomed out into a wonderful flower, acquiring with remarkable speed everything good and something of the baseness that was typical of her new entourage. Those belonging

to it knew about the jealous, frenzied love of the old writer for his wife, but no one believed that his love was reciprocated. "She's feathered her nest," they said. It was not just because of the difference in age—that was common enough. And not even because the writer of memoirs, in addition to an ungainly appearance, had an ungovernable, impatient nature and arrogant manners. During the cavalry attacks in the Civil War, he had, at times, hacked an enemy in two with a single stroke of his sword, but in literature he had no such exploits to his credit and this spoiled his temper. The reason for the general scepticism lay first of all in the charming Flora herself; all agreed that she deserved a better lot and wished her at least some chance of additional pleasure and consolation. It irked them to think that the fragrance of this flower was inhaled exclusively by the spongy nose of the old swordsman. But apparently Flora saw in him an entirely different man from the one everyone else saw; she saw grass-grown steppeland, reckless courage, great strength and boundless love. At the funeral repast Flora, already looking like one of the Weird Sisters, with her cheeks flushed, scanned the people gathered at the table with her huge eyes and proposed a toast: "Here's to the last of the real men. Now only midgets are left." And only then, rather belatedly, they saw the truth.

"What frightened me?" Flora asked in her

lately acquired humbly-defenceless-vicious manner, with the commanding overstrained tenor notes of her dead husband strangely echoing in her clear voice. "Why, you, of course. I am afraid of all people, not of animals, or snakes, or ghosts—only of people, live humans. I fear them worse than death."

This was said especially for Sergeyev's benefit, to irritate him and provoke a pointless dispute, in which the one who says nasty things always gets the upper hand. At any other time Sergeyev would probably have responded, but now, when other thoughts were but slowly fading out in his mind, he did not rise to the bait.

"Why on foot?" he asked.

Flora loved to drive -the ex-cavalryman had never managed to acquire command of the iron horse. Lately Flora's attachment to the car had been bordering on an obsession; it was as if she wanted to flee from her loss, pain, thoughts, from her own self.

"I'm not coming from Moscow. I've just been to the post office, to make a phone call. You probably know what a bore it is to wait for a long distance call. When I came out it was pitch dark, and I kept shivering all over—what if someone were to spring out at me from behind a bush? Oh!" Flora cried out, really frightened this time, and jumped aside as a dark figure appeared suddenly from a hazel grove.

Sergeyev steadied her by the elbow. He too

gave an involuntary start though he had no fear of people whether in the daytime or at night, in an open field or in a forest, on a deserted road or in a secluded lane. It was not because of an excessive trust in people, or particularly great confidence in himself; he simply had no fear of people.

The person that emerged onto the asphalt road from a side path that was invisible in the darkness, was slight, narrow-shouldered, rather tall, dressed in tight jeans, and had longish hair. A girl? No, a youth, almost just a boy, with wet hair sticking to his thin, drawn face.

"Do you happen to know the way to the sanatorium?" he asked, his voice still at the breaking stage, sounding rather alarmed.

"There are several of them here," Sergeyev said.

"Well, the one for the children ... with heart trouble."

"That's different. Go straight along the road without turning off anywhere. You'll reach a settlement—there's a sentry box there and a raised turnpike—go on past till you come to a crossroads, and turn left. You'll see some iron gates. They're not closed. The sanatorium is to the right; you'll see the buildings beyond the trees."

"Sounds complicated," the youth said. "I've been here in the daytime, found it quick enough then, but I don't seem to recognise anything now."

"No, it's simple enough. Go straight ahead till you come to the crossroads. Then to the gates and on along the path."

"Are you going that way? May I come along?"

"Come on."

"Goodness me-e-e!" Flora exclaimed in a common-folk drawl Sergeyev had never heard her use before. "All soaking wet. How'd you manage to get that way?"

That's why he looked so frail—the wet shirt and trousers stuck to his thin body.

"Had a dip," the youth answered briskly. "Got a smoke?"

"We don't smoke," Sergeyev said. "And don't advise you to, either."

The boy sneered disdainfully.

"Whoever takes a dip with all his clothes on?" Flora, now turned Fenya, continued in that same warm-hearted village speech.

"Yes, a stupid thing to happen," the boy said in a vexed tone. "I got off the bus too early, and thought I'd take a short cut. Got to a river, but there was no bridge in view. I thought I'd just leap over it. So I threw my case across first," he raised up his stylish flat black attaché case, "and missed. Had to take a dive for it, what else?"

"You should've taken your clothes off and then thrown everything across the river," Sergeyev remarked.

"What? Yes! Never thought of it, not very bright of me!.."

"It wasn't, was it?" Sergeyev sneered.

"He's only a boy yet! They not all that clever, the young 'uns," Flora interceded.

The lad threw her a grateful glance in the darkness. He knew that the grey-haired, heavily breathing man, who looked so good-natured, had seen through his fibbing, and wondered vexedly why one got into a mess with the grown-ups so often.

Doesn't the much-experienced Flora realise he is lying? wondered Sergeyev. Most likely the lad reached the river at the bend where the local boys catch crayfish. The foppish appearance of this city boy with long hair and the fashionable black case had naturally annoyed the young fishermen and so they had "dipped" him in the shallow, quiet little stream in all his outfit, and with his black attaché case clasped firmly in his hand. A popular enough practical joke played on uninvited guests. The lad probably did not put up much of a fight or else he'd have invented a more heroic story.

It was strangely pleasant to catch the boy lying but it was mortifying to admit his own petty maliciousness. The mixture of these two moods aroused a feeling of hostility towards the boy. While Flora, bitter, irritable, and blaming the whole world for her loneliness, treated the boy with obvious sympathy. She kept asking him about all sorts of things. The lad said that he lived in Moscow and was now going to see his mother-in-law.

"Who?" Flora was amazed.

"My mother-in-law," he repeated calmly.

"How old are you then?"

"Seventeen. I finish school this year."

"A mere schoolboy—and got a mother-in-law already!"

"You didn't get me. I date the daughter. So, that's what her mother is called."

"Think of that! And I thought you meant you were married!"

"What an idea! My girl's only sixteen. I'm soon getting my school-leaving certificate, but she still has another year to drag through."

"And how does her mother feel about you, bridegroom?"

"Auntie Polya? Why, she's a neighbour of ours, we live in the same block. She's got a cleaner's job here just for the summer. She'll be sure to give me something dry to change into and a cup of hot tea with raspberry jam."

"Look here, young hero," Flora said. "What is this staying at a cardiological sanatorium and smoking and strolling around in wet clothes! Doesn't make sense!"

"But it's not me, it's Tanya. Her heart doesn't keep pace with the rate of her growth. So she's got irregular heart beats, arrhythmia. They say she'll grow out of it."

"Of course she will," Flora asserted. "Acceleration, d'you know the word?"

"Yes, that's getting as tall as a maypole. Tanya's not that bad. She's just a bit taller than me."

"That's normal. Unless she continues growing."

"She won't," the lad assured Flora. "That's a cert. Though I may still stretch up a bit."

"Isn't this exam time at school?" Sergeyev asked, suddenly remembering.

"Sure. I've got a maths exam tomorrow."

"And that's how you're studying for it?"

"Why bother? I don't know maths, and never will. But they'll give me a pass mark anyway."

"What do you mean 'anyway'?"

"Just that. Why should they want to flunk me? They'll give me the pass mark in maths and physics. And I'll get top marks in biology on my own, and passes in all the rest of the subjects."

"When we went to school," Sergeyev said quietly, "nobody would dream of giving us satisfactory marks just like that."

"Right enough," the boy said. "You went through ten years of school because you meant to get a higher education. But I wanted to go to work after the eighth year. Just felt sorry for mother; she'd set her heart on my getting the ten-year-school certificate. She hoped I'd go to college. Just watch me do it! So there's two whole years gone to waste! And I'm not the only one..."

You had to give him credit for frankness—he was not trying to make himself out better than he was. He lied just once, at the very beginning, but then could one really expect

a seventeen-year-old youth, a Romeo hurrying to meet his Juliet, to confess to having been given a ducking?

"What kind of work do you intend to do?" Flora asked.

"My father's job suits me fine," he said as if that information needed no further elaboration. "If these two years hadn't gone down the drain, I'd already be past the apprentice stage."

"And what does your father do?"

"He's a fitter."

"How much does he earn?"

"Two hundred. He's got a high rating."

"Fair enough!"

"Of course. Only he has to pay alimony," the boy added, sympathising with his father's predicament.

"So! He had a previous family then?"

"He did have—mother and me. He pays mother alimony because of me."

"I see," Flora said, somewhat perplexed. "But you are going to work?"

"Yes. It'll be easier for him then. I've got two step-sisters there, they're twins, and an old grandmother."

"Do you often see your father?"

"Not what you'd call often, but I see him. He pops in now and then, and sometimes I drop in at the factory where he works."

"Doesn't he want you to continue your education?"

"To be an engineer, you mean? Five more

years of drudgery? Why should he? He bears me no malice."

And what about dreams? Sergeyev thought. How calculating and earthy this envoy from the mysterious land of youth was! He seems to be a good enough sort, he respects honest labour, but why doesn't he want to go a step further than his father? So down-to-earth and sober at the age of seventeen! Or is there something I don't understand? In my childhood years the name "engineer" sounded important and romantic, a sort of password into the future. My parents were very disappointed when it became clear to them that I would not become an engineer. But nowadays the young people all over the world are being drawn to manual work. Fine, intelligent lads prefer to work with their hands. It seems to them, and probably that's how it really is, that this ensures them an inner freedom. What can be better and more honest than "work done by the sweat of the brow"? And yet, one would wish to see a young person dreaming of something out of reach. What exactly? A flight to Jupiter. A handshake with a visitor from another planet... Sergeyev grew sad.

They stepped onto the bridge across the river; the freshly white-washed railings marked its outline in the darkness.

"Damn that attaché case!" the lad said with a shudder, remembering the ducking. So it was not from cold, but from the

memory of the humiliation that he shuddered.

"Are you cold?" Flora asked. "Look here... What if your mother-in-law's asleep, and your knocking won't wake her... You come to me. Maple Tree Alley No. 17. I'll give you tea and there'll be some jam and plenty of dry underwear."

"Thanks. But Auntie Polya isn't asleep. She knows I'll be sure to come. Alive or dead!" He liked the joke and laughed, loudly and trustfully.

When they had crossed the river, which breathed fresh coolness, the travellers were enveloped by the warm and dense darkness of the settlement street and the fragrance of bird-cherries and alders in bloom.

"Oho, here's the sentry-box and the turnpike, all as promised!" the boy said, but his confidence was affected, he still did not recognise the place which he had only happened to visit in the daytime.

"We'll see you off," Flora said.

"Don't. I'm not a kid. I'd feel foolish..."

"What about acting foolish?" Flora interrupted him.

"You win," the boy laughed.

The rusty gates squeaked with a sad, dog-like wail.

"Delivery guaranteed!.."

The lad felt that he had imposed on the kindness of strangers and was hiding his confusion by joking. But he still did not know where to go. At the end of a long alley

something suspicious was going on, something which had no connection either with the sanatorium or with its heart-condition patients, or with the medical or administrative personnel, the crude, unceremonious activity of a healthy couple drawn together by wine and desire.

"Don't go there," Sergeyev said waving his hand. "Climb over that low fence and you'll find yourself right by the garage."

"I see! Thanks. Good-bye!" A faint light spread over the open space. The outlines of trees, the paling, and the clumps of rowans along the alley stood out from the darkness, the sky could be distinguished from the earth and stars glimmered in the gaps between the now visible clouds. A crescent moon appeared over the trees.

Only then did Sergeyev really see the youth—his slim, narrow body in still wet clothes, the thin, untanned face framed in the long wet hair, the wax-like acquiline nose—the frail and independent face of a youth who is not going to have it easy in life. Then the boy turned around and disappeared into the shadow of the bushes; he came into sight again by the low fence and vanished on the other side of it.

"Let's go," Sergeyev said.

"What's the hurry? What if someone attacks him?" the peasant-mother in Fenya asked angrily.

Her late husband had given her a happy life but had left behind only material possessions,

a gnawing sadness, and some of his nasty temper; he had not given her a child and the all-engulfing worries of a mother.

The new moon soon became stronger and the world, liberated from temporary immobility, woke up in nocturnal beauty: it sparkled and glimmered, exuding an aromatic freshness which washed away everything base that stirred in the unawakened space. The movements and noises at the end of the alley had ceased, a translucent silence embraced the universe and in the midst of it a light girlish exclamation splashed out: "At last!" It was as if someone had waved a white kerchief beyond the low fence.

Then they heard the pitiful, gasping voice of their new acquaintance.

"What's this?.. Barefoot? With nothing but a dress on? Are you crazy? Haven't been ill for too long?.."

"We were worried sick!" But then the offended pride of the little woman made her add irritably, "A fine one you are!.." And then frightened: "Why, you are soaking wet!?"

"Fell into the river... I'll explain later. What are we to do now? I'd carry you but you might get still colder from being close to me..."

"I won't get colder from being close to you. Who said you'd ever manage to carry me... Oh, don't! Don't! You're as cold as a frog!"

"Here, put on my shoes. They've dried out."

"Never mind."

"I do mind! Why did your mother let you go? She'll sure get it from me!"

"Silly... I got out through the window."

"How could you?" the boy was indignant. "Want to get sick again? Let's run. No, you mustn't run. Oh damn!"

"Stop it! Where were you gallivanting?"

"I wasn't gallivanting. I swear..."

"Lady, by yonder blessed moon I swear,
That tips with silver all these fruit tree tops."

The girl put in:

"O, swear not by the moon, th' inconstant moon,
That monthly changes in her circled orb,
Lest that thy love prove likewise variable."

"What shall I swear by?" the lad continued.

"Do not swear at all;
Or if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self,
Which is the god of my idolatry.
And I'll believe thee."

"How wonderful!" Flora murmured. What did it bring back to her, Sergeyev thought. A declaration of love beside a village fence in the years of her youth, or that final battle that the old cavalryman with hair as silvery-grey as the feather-grass threw himself into

for her sake? After all didn't he himself discern the nightingale love song, the song of Romeo and Juliet, in the telegraphic briefness of modern slangy talk?

Most likely the real Romeo and Juliet spoke differently from the way Shakespeare wrote it, but he detected poetry in their artless words. It was that same note ringing out now—tender, clear, resonant. It was this note the lonely heart of the ageing Flora heard. Oh Flora, Flora. Sergeyev's very soul gave a deep sigh: It is true! That name does bring to mind a lovely flower and that flower is she herself.

"Well, let's go?" he said aloud.

The woman gave no answer, she walked away at once. Sergeyev followed her. By the gates he looked back. There was no one beyond the low fence. But all the same he did get a glimpse of a mysterious, unknown land and there was a light shining there...

THE RIVER OF HERACLITUS

This year I broke my long-standing habit of not going away anywhere in the summer months. I travel only in the spring and autumn: I am too greedy for work in the summer, and my brain works too well to give up the accustomed, well-organised and book-filled world in my summer-house just outside Moscow, and to go rushing off somewhere. But for some time I had noticed intermissions in the usually unfailing working mechanism, it was as though something was missing, and this was hindering both my life and my work. I discovered with surprise what an important role was played in the summer months by the two or three hours which I spent in the woods. It was there, and not at my writing-desk, that the best part of my writing was done. And not at all because the woods, the full length and breadth of which I had covered in my walks, helped my inner con-

centration, but because they constantly excited me, asked me riddles, and by doing so spurred on my mental work. But recently the limited area encompassed by the bends of the Diesna River, where my life was being lived, ceased to be sufficient.

For a quarter of a century every walk had brought me new discoveries, but now I was drawing an empty net. Whereas I had previously taken dives into the unknown, I was now merely undertaking hygienic exercise which, in the absence of impressions, was little better than running on the spot. My spirit was silent, and no longer reacted as it had done in the past, as it had done countless and countless times before.

And then one day my friends reminded me that I lived on the borders of a marvellous country, called Kaluga Region, a country which had been witness to the pain and glory of Russia: there is the beautiful city of Kaluga itself, gazing down on the waters of the Oka, swelled by the Ugra and the Sukhodrev, there are woods rich in berries and mushrooms, there are historical towns, ancient monasteries and the sites of famous battles. And there, in the village of Myatlevo, on the banks of the Ugra, my friends had, with full rights of occupation, a house that was just waiting to give me refuge. I was to be transported into another reality, without really going away, without breaking the bond of habit which maintained my working regime. It was just

what I needed, a journey of the spirit, without the attendant passing of miles. The unexpected arrival from Tallinn of my old friend Grazius removed any remaining doubts. Blond with a touch of steel, with a sharp profile, an un-Slavonic cold blueness in his eye, and a thin, agile body, Grazius claims to be descended from the Scandinavian seafarers. He has more sides to him than anyone else I know: he is a scholar and a bibliophil, a collector of antiques, an expert on the subject of icons and ancient Russian art, a polyglot, and a fount of all kinds of information. Grazius' forefathers were not to be kept at home, and my friend has inherited their geographical restlessness. He is always rushing off somewhere, often without cause or aim. When he learnt that my friends had invited me to go to Myatlevo, straight away he went into raptures about the country around Kaluga with which were linked some of the greatest names of Russian history: the Archpriest Avvakum, Boyarinya Morozova and the Countess Urusova, the architect Bazhenov, the mathematician Chebyshev, even Pushkin and Tolstoy, then Marshal Zhukov, the poetess Marina Tsvetayeva... Grazius' enthusiasm communicated itself to me, and never before had I left home in so carefree a mood...

He seemed to have expected my arrival, this neighbour of my Myatlevo hosts. He was a narrow-shouldered, sinewy man wearing a

faded pink vest, worn-out trousers which were only just held in place on his hips, and with a cloth cap on his head. His face and his arms, bare to the shoulders, were black with sunburn; but the skin under the shoulder straps of his vest, and his forehead under the broken peak of his cap, were still milk white. He was unable to bend his left leg at the knee, and when he stepped on it he raised himself up strangely into the air. His yellow eyes looked around him with interest and as though with tenderness, but they did not inspire trust. Oh, how strong and precise are the behests of the unconscious in man! It was only some time later that I remembered my friends having told me of their first months in Myatlevo. This yellow-eyed and lovable fellow had taken up his axe when they tried to dig over a sod or two, to satisfy the ancient longing of town-dwellers for home-grown onions and radishes. "Townsfolk have no call to touch the earth!" he had yelled at them. "What d'you think the earth is for? Planting things in it?" And my friends gave up their blasphemous intentions. I must assume that since that time the neighbourly relations had improved, that the differences had been smoothed away, and that therefore some sort of amiability was required of me.

He caught me on my way from the little wooden shack which hid itself away modestly in the broom.

"So you've come, then?" he said with a

smile, and planted a well sharpened axe in a log.

Nearby, leaning against the fence, there were five or six brand new rakes.

"Just for a visit," I quickly explained, so that he should not suspect Grazius and me of being secret gardeners. "For a day or two. I see you're making rakes?"

"They're for the state farm!" he answered eagerly, and with some irony, as though it were something trifling. "They pay two roubles a rake. I don't kill myself: just a couple a day, that's enough. I could knock up half a dozen, but what for? I've got my war pension, and we've a few animals as well. The kids all live away from home, only the youngest's still with me. He's a machine operator. Want a smoke?" he offered, taking out a packet of Marlborough.

"I've done my smoking," I answered, pointing to my heart. "Where do you get those from?"

"They're in the local store. It's full of them. Not many people go for them; they're dear, and too mild. Does the smoke bother you?"

"Not outdoors. What else do they have there?"

"Jamaica rum. And our own port, of course. A saddle, a good one, with stirrups. Prams. And that's about all."

He lit a cigarette, let out the aromatic smoke, and we sat down on a bench near his house.

"There's only three able-bodied people in the place," he told me confidentially. "Venka the Nut, Nyurka the Flea, and Vasili Mine. The rest are all on their pensions. Old Peka, Vakushka and me, we've got war wounds, and the women are all getting on in years."

If I had been short of information, then Alexei Timofeyevich (my neighbour) had been in agony at not having had anyone to share it with. We were going to get on fine.

"Where were you wounded?" I asked.

"In the fighting round Kursk."

"And were the Germans here in this village?"

"Certainly! They burnt down half the village. It was a huge village then, three full streets. When it was built up again, then they made just the one, see how long it is!"

When we had driven into Myatlevo, right by the local store, somewhere in the middle of the village that would be, we couldn't see the end of the street to either right or left. The houses were strong, with plank or iron roofs, they had neat and tidy gardens, and well-kept yards. Nevertheless, the village looked neglected. No smoke came from the chimneys, there were few chickens or ducks in the yards, and even fewer calves tied to poles, or pigs wallowing in the mud. The smell of life was absent. But the answer to this was quite simple: the local inhabitants could almost be counted on the fingers of one hand, and the rest were visitors from town.

Some would come at weekends, others might come just when berries or mushrooms were in season. I asked Alexei Timofeyevich how many people actually lived in Myatlevo.

"There may be fifteen families," he answered after a pause. "The rest come from Kaluga, Medyn or Moscow."

"Doesn't it get boring?"

"Who for?"

"For you?"

"For us? When are we to get bored? We work in the daytime. We've got a colour telly. The river's just over there. For those that fish."

"Do they bite?"

"Who?"

"The fish, who else!"

"The fish don't bite here at all. But a fisherman might fish out the bottle so often sometimes, that he can't even stagger home. Have you come to do some fishing?"

"We were thinking of it."

"Just here you'd be wasting your time. You should try by the bridge. You've passed over it."

"The bridge over the Ugra?"

"Yes. You probably saw the fishermen..."

At this moment a short, sturdy, wide-hipped old woman came out of the house and, waddling like a duck, passed us with a waste-bucket in her hand. Round, silver ear-rings hung from her flabby ear-lobes. I said good-day to her. Glumly, without looking in

my direction, she answered my greeting.

"That's my young bride," Alexei Timofeyevich said with a grin.

"Is she not happy that I'm keeping you away from your work?"

"That's alright, my work won't run away," he answered carelessly. "No, she thinks we're planning to hit the bottle."

"Doesn't she like that?"

"What woman likes her man drinking? Unless she likes a drop herself. But you won't find many like that in the country... Mine's pretty strict about it. We've not been together long, you might say we're still sizing each other up... I lived a long time with my first wife, but she passed away last year. We knocked together four sons and a daughter, me and her. I've taken on this one just to look after the house and things. You know how hard it is for a couple of fellas without a woman, especially when there's a cow to tend."

"You mean she really is your young bride! I thought you were joking."

"She's my young bride, good and proper! And with a character too! She came with a will. She brought three sheep with her, a pig and piglet, and a whole flock of geese ... eight beaks, all told. Her fella was badly wounded in the war; he came home, hung around for five years or so, and then died. She's got a married daughter, lives over there, beyond Polotnyany Zavod, but doesn't invite her

mother to go over. Her husband's a right drunkard, and when he's got the fever, he'll go for his axe. And we all know how much respect a fella's got for his mother-in-law... My Tatyana was real glad to get married. She was lonely on her own, she likes keeping house; but just for herself there was no interest in it. And then, there was our cow here. So she came to us, and she fair got going. She never sits down to the telly here, she's so busy. Why she fusses around so, that's a different matter. We didn't used to eat roast peacock, and we don't now. We used to have cabbage soup, and we still have. Mind you, if she wants to bustle about all day, then she's welcome. Only she should let a fella have his own interests. But she up and rebelled against them."

I didn't ask what these "interests" were, that caused such displeasure in the "young bride". And Alexei Timofeyevich considered it unnecessary to explain; it was fairly obvious as it was.

"I must say though, she's not one of these old women who nag at you day and night. She just grumbles to herself, and goes on slaving away. But she knows what's what. There's always work going on in that pretty little skull of hers, I've never met anyone like her for thinking. My first wife, God rest her soul, wouldn't switch her brain on from one day to the next; and my youngest, except when he was on the mechanics' course, has

never used his nut, he could put it away safe in the cellar so little use is it to him; but me, now, I'm a thinker. I've been through a lot, what with the war and all. And when me and Venka the Nut get together, it's terrible, we can hardly breathe for all our thinking. But then, if you get carried away making rakes or something, you'll suddenly stop, and wonder, Lord when was it I last had a good think?! You, of course, you're a man of the town, you earn your daily bread with your grey matter, and do you do much serious thinking?"

"No," I answered honestly, "hardly any at all. You know there was a Frenchman called Pascal, he was a well-known philosopher, you know, a scholar who..."

"Oh, I know what a philosopher is," Alexei Timofeyevich interrupted placidly. "It's one who gets drunk, and then worries himself silly about the state of the world. There was a time, people like him weren't just patted on the head."

"And before that they were burnt at the stake. Pascal wasn't burnt. He was cunning, he drank on the quiet, and watched his tongue. But he was held to be the wisest man of his time. And just before he died he admitted that he'd had serious thoughts only on the rarest occasions."

"But his must've been good thoughts, seeing as people remember him... My young bride's not like him ... she's deep in thought

from morning 'til night, she's so serious she's never in her life been known to smile. She doesn't speak out, she just stores it all up for herself. And then she acts. That's how it was with us. One Sunday me and my youngest were still not quite right after the night before, but there was a dust cloud floating across the village: it was her taking her flock to her daughter. She didn't warn her she was coming, she decided it all for herself. Wasn't even afraid of her son-in-law. She didn't take a pin that wasn't hers, but she didn't forget a thing that was. We were so amazed we got stoned again."

The "young bride" passed us, this time with an empty bucket, and she put on the same glum, unfriendly look as before.

"This is our neighbours' guest," Alexei Timofeyevich considered it necessary to define my position. "You've no call to frown so, he doesn't share my interests."

The "young bride" made no answer; she went on into the house, re-appeared immediately with a sieve full of early windfalls, then disappeared round a corner of the house.

"What a woman!" Alexei Timofeyevich chuckled. "Nothing but boozing on her mind, as though people can't have anything else to talk about. How stupid can you get!"

"So how did it all end?" I asked.

"How did what end?"

"With your wife?"

"With this one?.. It didn't end at all. Like

I said, she went to her daughter's, driving all the live-stock before her. Except for the cow, of course. But how's a fella supposed to handle a cow? I took it over to my eldest. I thought, let him have the milk for his family. But he went and sold the cow straight off. Bought himself a colour telly, and a torch for me, only there's no batteries. With the rest of the money, of course, he went on a spree. And then our countess decided to come back. She didn't like it at her daughter's. She was bored. And her son-in-law was playing up. Generally he's peaceable, but when he's been drinking, it's straight for the axe. More for show, really, but he does lay into benches and tables."

"Does he often get drunk?"

"He drinks every day... I wouldn't say he puts a lot away, but he'll get through a bottle of the red stuff a day. True, it makes you a bit funny, but what's a bottle of red wine to a full-grown man? Anyway, our marchioness didn't settle in at her daughter's. They didn't even have a cow, bought milk in the shop when there was any. Her son-in-law had chopped off one of her geese's heads, and he'd promised to make a roast of one of the sheep. So she sent word she wanted to come back. I was in two minds. I felt as though there was something missing here. When she's bustling about the house, you can swear at her once in a while, or at least say something now and then; without her you might forget what the human

voice sounds like. And I don't like cooking. My lad could get himself a hot dinner in the canteen, but I was on bread and water. But what about the cow?.. She'd been fairly fond of that cow. A torch is an interesting little thing, but it can't take the place of a cow. So I went to Venka the Nut for some advice. Now he doesn't waste his words, but he's got a brain like a spotlight. Venka listened, then said: 'Where's the bottle?' Off I went to the store, and came back with a bottle of red. Venka said: 'The red's bad for my head.' So what was I to do? You won't find any vodka nearer than Polotnyany Zavod. D'you know about Polotnyany Zavod? Pushkin found a wife for himself there, Natalya Goncharova. He was a real great one for gambling in those days and he'd lost everything, so he decided he'd marry a rich woman. Polotnyany Zavod's where they made sails for the fleet. But that's an old story... Anyway, I got a lift with a fella who was going that way, again they had nothing but red. They told me there was some 'Extra' at five roubles twenty in the Blue Danube cafe near the station. There was nothing else for it... So I bought a bottle and went on the train to Lev Tolstoy, from there I got a ride on the milk lorry as far as the farm, and then walked the rest... By the way, d'you know why they called the station Lev Tolstoy? Because he died there when he ran away from home. In the signalman's hut. Afterwards the signalman went and took to

the bottle. You can understand the fella, there he was, living a quiet life, moving the signals up and down, waving his yellow flag, and suddenly, like a ton of bricks, there's Russia's unparalleled genius standing in front of you. In he walks, lies down on your bench, and snuffs it. Of course, the signalman couldn't take it, people crack up from less than that... Anyway, me and Venka sat down and started drinking, him his vodka, me my red. He sat thinking for ages, now this way, now that, he's a careful fella, you know. At last he said: 'It's too far to go to Polotnyany again, we'll have to make do with the store's red this time. It might make my head ache, but we'll get the right decision, like it was a court.' I ran off to the store, and they were just putting up the lock on the door. I didn't even have time to call out: 'Wait!' when I saw a cloud hanging over the road, sort of pink in the evening sun, and under the cloud, just in front, there was my princess driving her flock: the sheep, the pig and piglet, and the geese her son-in-law had spared. She'd got tired of waiting, or maybe she'd decided that silence was a sign of agreement, and she was coming back. But I was glad to see her and, damn it, I'd gone and wasted so much money on that stupid Venka. I managed to get a bottle of port anyway, and the two of us finished it off together. She didn't nag at me too much about the cow, she let it all out in tears. You can understand her; the cow had had a tight

udder, but she was a first-rate milker. So I promised to set about the rakes a bit harder, and we'd get another."

We went on talking for a while, until we heard the sound of a tractor, which came up to the house and stopped. The cabin was empty, it must have been like one of those self-propelled Galleat tanks, remote-controlled.

"Mother!" Alexei Timofeyevich called out. "Vasili's home! Come and help me..."

He approached the tractor and I saw, lying on the ground, a tow-haired youth fast asleep; he had been jerked out of his seat when, mechanically and unconsciously, he had stopped the tractor by his home. Alexei Timofeyevich's relative calm seemed to suggest that there was nothing unusual in the return of his youngest from work in this condition. My neighbour's "young bride" didn't keep him waiting, and together they lifted up the youth and carried his limp body into the house.

I was then suddenly aware of how many children there were all around me. It was almost like Breughel's terrible picture *Children Playing*, or Kafka's *Trial*, where they almost play the unfortunate hero to death. But I don't remember the novel in much detail and, besides, I read it in German, so that with my queer semi-knowledge of that language I often had to guess—or, rather, imagine—not only individual words, but sometimes whole

phrases; it is entirely possible that Kafka's mischievous children posed no threat at all to the hero. Probably, indeed, my passion for reading in German or English is partly from the sense of co-authorship in this manner, and partly because there always remains a deeply mysterious innuendo in what I read. Once I actually read a Russian translation of one particular Gothic novel which I had earlier thus co-authored in the English, and I was amazed at how feeble it was, although I would have been hard pressed to say what depths had opened up before me in the original.

These children here, then, were not playing, were not being naughty or mischievous, they were simply watching and exchanging impressions. And the object of their dangerous curiosity was a stranger, a newcomer, a foreigner: in a word—me. Feeling a lump of ice between my shoulder blades, I adopted a carefree attitude and, in my turn, began to examine the children. There were three of them leaning against next-door's fence. One thin little girl with her hair in a pony-tail was constantly adjusting something in her dress: now a strap of her vest which had slipped off her thin shoulder, now the heel of her sock which had wriggled its way round to the front, now her knickers which had made their appearance from under her frock. A second little girl with a broad, immobile face was just as restless and found

a constant need to be doing something: digging a speck of dust out of her eye, dragging a beetle out of her ear, spitting out, scratching a scar on her arm, swatting a gadfly on her neck, brushing away a horse-fly, rubbing her back on the fence; not a moment's peace, how tired she must be by the end of the day; and what a contradiction this kinetic storm was to the stillness of her blank face. Calm and tranquility, however, emanated from the third member of the company, a big fat boy, wearing the oddest assortment of clothes: a peak-cap, like a sea-captain's, a pea-jacket, grey woollen pants, and galoshes. The captain's facade was directed towards me, but he was certainly not drilling me with his eyes; rather, he was standing with humble dignity, offering his own person for my inspection.

From our house there were two older boys watching me on the sly; I seemed to have seen them before, and one of them, the slim one with the thin, ivory-coloured face, I had known before my arrival in Myatlevo. When his eyes met mine, he looked away, perhaps in anger, perhaps in shame, as he was already touched with an inkling of the value of his outward shape and form. The other boy was simpler, he was not yet aware of his individuality, he remained merely part of nature.

Then there was another little girl, about seven years old, creeping along the fence, staring with strange, glittering eyes; I could not make out their colour, they were like

glass balls on flower beds, reflecting the colour of the world looking in on them: the sky, the grass, the flowers, the birds. Further away there were other children of all ages, and all of them looking at me. I was besieged on all sides, there was no escape. How clumsy and stupid I felt, standing there on neutral ground between two houses, just where I had been attacked by the terrifying apparition of children. The sun was in my eyes, and the mosquitoes were biting; I have never met such fierce creatures. But my every gesture was under observation; that held me back, and I just jerked, I was unable to make an energetic swipe.

My rescue came in the form of my hostess, Vera Nesterovna, the embodiment of reliability, safety and protective power. She was a large woman, her breasts, like those of the women painted by Lukas Cranach, were squeezed almost to nought, her hips were broad, her legs were heavy and slow; her blue-eyed, doll-like face held a deception of childish simplicity, for she was deep and sharp.

"Samotsvetov Fedya! Knyazhevich!" she fell upon the two older boys. "Why aren't you off fetching the water? How many times do I have to tell you?"

Then I recalled that Knyazhevich was Vera Nesterovna's son, and that I had known him since he was a baby, though I generally saw little of him. He was highly sensitive to other people's existence, and in the presence of

strangers he would either sulk or clown about, then he would be removed from the room. Besides which, since our last meeting, quite some time previously, he had changed his appearance entirely, like a snake shedding its skin. Fedya Samotsvetov, his cousin, I had met only recently, when we arrived in Myatlevo.

Vera Nesterovna's everyday tone took away the shroud of dangerous mystery and lifted the curse of the children's world. Nobody was plotting anything, and the children were looking, not just at me, a stranger, but at each other as well, at the hens, at the dogs, the butterflies and dragon-flies, at everything that inhabited the landscape and, of course, at the little girl who was creeping along the fence, the last remaining riddle in this world now so bereft of secrets.

"Are you here again, Masha?" Vera Nesterovna fell upon her, bringing the elfin creature to earth. "Does your mother know?"

The little girl bent her spine, like a gymnast on a bar just before a backward somersault; with a graceful curving movement she straightened up, leant forward, again straightened up, intertwined her fingers, drooped her chestnut head towards her right shoulder, and for a moment froze in this pose of hopeless exhaustion. Vera Nesterovna patiently and angrily watched this dance of the dying swan. The girl's eyes lived a separate life from her body: her body told lies, pretended,

distracted, and lulled the hostile force of others' perspicacity; but her eyes served the truth as they were fixed beyond Vera Nesterovna on the all-embracing focal point—the romantic figure of Knyazhevich.

"You should have some pity on your mother! She's probably mad with worry already. She'll have gone down to the river with a boat-hook, I expect. Oh, you disobedient girl! I've told you before not to come here."

The unyielding stare of Masha's yellow eyes—now reflecting the sunflowers on Vera Nesterovna's dress—made my hostess turn to look at the object of her gaze.

"Misha, you lazy boy, are you still here?! Go and fetch that water at once! Fedya needs some help with the bucket over there."

Misha's cheeks gleamed opal, the effect of a blush on a face that was a pale sort of dark-complexioned, with just a hint of yellow, the colour of ivory. He tossed his head haughtily, his thick dark locks winding in rings around his slender neck, and then he walked off slowly. At the very same moment Masha, too, vanished.

"What the devil?!" Vera Nesterovna exclaimed in amazement. "Gone was the princess, gone like a dream."

Vera Nesterovna and I discovered this particular princess simultaneously; she was in the burdocks behind the house, making her way through the prickly verdure towards the

well. Vera Nesterovna looked at her, grinned, and ... turned into a pillar of salt. This happened to her quite often: with an excess of cares and interests at her fingertips, she would not always know what to tackle next. Now, for example, the possibilities were innumerable: she could get the lunch ready, or go to the river, or mend her husband's hiking trousers (he was planning to go to the Altai Mountains for his holiday), she could read the memoires of Nikolai Tsebrikov*, or have a practice on the lute (an instrument of which she was fond), or she could give up all external and internal fuss and simply light a cigarette. It was this last on which she now settled.

The children also went their separate ways, and there remained only the sea-captain in his grey pants. He was watching the manoeuvres of a bright orange cock as it pursued a speckled hen. The hen persistently avoided the importuning Adonis, but at last the cock succeeded in trampling on its prey, whereupon it immediately lost interest and set off after others of its wives, lifting high its sinewy, spurred legs. The hen shook off the dust, dropped a grey feather in the process, and calmly set about pecking at some entrails which it found nearby. The captain shook his forehead in satisfaction, approving of the wisdom of the natural world, and went away

* Nikolai Tsebrikov—a participant of the 1825 "Decembrist" revolt against the Russian monarchy.—*Ed.*

behind the shed on his maritime business. And for some reason I had an urge to write about Count Odoyevsky. I knew nothing about him except that he wrote, made experiments, was knowledgeable about music, and was considered to be an eccentric. I once read his tale about Bach, Johann Sebastian, about whom he, in turn, also knew nothing. But Pushkin was delighted with the tale and even exclaimed, anticipating the style of later epochs: "There was a time when we had no historical tales, but now that time is past!" Pushkin felt himself to be responsible for Russian literature, which is why he was so lenient towards the humble creations of his contemporaries, and wanted to encourage them. But that is beside the point. I wanted to write about Count Odoyevsky. What exactly—I had no idea. But I wanted to write about him. I had to write about him. How this urge was connected with my hostess and the six-year-old captain in his grey woollen pants, with the bright orange cock and the speckled hen, and indeed with all the other sights around me—I was equally unable to say.

And there was a forest...

And there was a river...

And there was an evening...

And in the forest, in the dense, close, hot, fragrant and splendid forest, there were mosquitoes, horse-flies and gadflies. We all fended them off with twigs, Vera Nesterovna and Grazius smoked cigarette after cigarette,

breathing the smoke out of their mouths, their nostrils and their ears, but alas, unlike the well brought up taiga version, the flying vermin in these parts were not afraid of smoke. The horse-flies and gadflies—the former stinging painfully, the latter itchingly drilling into our skin to lay their eggs—perished countlessly from our swatting, but this in no way deterred the remaining hordes. I need say no more about the mosquitoes than that they were crazy about our life juices, and they departed this life in a euphoric state. We came out of the forest blood-stained, as from a battle...

The Ugra is one of the best small rivers in Central Russia: it is wide, full, deep, with a sufficiently strong current to keep it clear, it has a sandy bottom and banks that are not overgrown, sometimes steep, sometimes flat, but always clean and solid. It was wonderful to enter the cooling water, wash away the mosquitoes, lie face upwards with eyes closed, and drift with the current.

We then sat for a long time on the bank under some elm trees. The mosquitoes left us alone here. There was a light breeze at ground level, which rustled the grass but stirred not a single leaf on the trees, and which caused the miniature demons to hide away.

There was no breeze in the forest, and a new battle awaited us on the walk back.

Evening was in no hurry to pass, it allowed the sunset to blaze itself away. The crimson

flames in the west turned the silvery Ugra into a river of blood, and all the mosquitoes rushed towards it to dip their proboscises into the red stream and to gorge themselves on the substance of life. They soon realised their mistake and, enflamed with malice, returned to their previous haunts.

We eventually gave up all attempts at resistance. As we sat on the veranda at the side of the house, each of us was surrounded by a dense, hovering cloud. You might have thought it was a cloud of pomegranate seeds, so much like rubies did the bloated insects' bellies glow.

As darkness came on we heard a heavy tramping of feet—the small village herd was returning from its pasture; and we heard the gentle, coaxing voices of the animals' various mistresses ringing out in the stillness. The voice of the "young bride" next door we did not hear, but in her yard there appeared four sheep, stuck together like cheap chocolates, three of them full-grown, one little more than a lamb. Then it seemed that this was but a single, four-headed sheep, so well synchronised were the movements of the indivisible body. This unified sheep was dismembered when the youngest element failed to keep up with the impetuous movements of the other three. Whenever it fell behind, it would rush after the others, panic-stricken, and press itself close to its mother's side. And there arose yet another image: the affectedly curved

necks, the dull meekness in all four faces, you could almost see the halo over each of their flat heads, they were four meek, Biblical rams hovering there, their small hooves hardly touching the ground. As one they began to crop the grass, as one they stopped, then described another incredible, and apparently unprovoked, zig-zag. They were so resigned, to the point of meanness, they so acutely denied even a hint of individuality, and they were so submissive to Heaven knows what; their behaviour was irritating, and my thoughts turned rapaciously to sacrificial rites, immolation, and shashlik. The "young bride" appeared with a bucket, poured some water into a trough, and called to the sheep. At the double they reared up gracefully, turned round on their hind legs and, twisting their necks full-circle, rushed at the trough; only the young one could not keep up with the chase, it dashed forwards but, frightened out of its wits, turned and hurtled after the others as fast as its legs would carry it.

I slept on the veranda, where the ubiquitous, star-packed sky drew me forth and planted me in space. The sky was the same as it had been in my childhood, when I slept in the apple orchard near Sukhotnya, or under a hay-stack in the night pasture; it was all around, it was unpaled by any light from the earth, it stirred, glittered, flashed, pulsed, lived ... and only the Milky Way remained immobile.

And there was an immense silence. I, a permanent resident of a village too close to Moscow, had forgotten what the silent world was like. Oh, those Young Pioneer bugles and the envigorating physical exercise commands which ring out far and wide, not to mention the six records which accompany—have for the last twenty years accompanied—both the Young Pioneers', and our own, lives from early morning to late in the evening; the cars, bulldozers, tractors and motor-cycles play their parts; three times a day the electric milking machinery on the dairy farm sends forth its paschal sounds—I do so like to look at Kustodiev's Volga landscapes, with their marvellous churches and bell-towers against the background of a deep blue sky, to the accompaniment of the milking machinery's chimes. But the major sonic force pours down from above, where there is a concentration of helicons, trombones, drums and brass cymbals: over our heads the jet air liners from Vnukovo Airport gather height, and the helicopter routes linking the Vnukovo and Domodedovo Airports lie above us, the giant dragon-flies almost touching the tops of the pine trees around us; the old, worn-out aircraft, who have long deserved a proper rest, crawl wheezing above us as they patrol the Kaluga Highway, and the chirring agricultural aircraft diligently spray our humble gardens with a white slime; sometimes the brilliant, cloudless sky gives forth a tremen-

dous thunder as new fighter aircraft break the sound barrier. At night, and I sleep with the window open, dragons spouting red fire pass so low that I have to press my head into the pillow. There is no silence, no sky, for I cannot use the word sky for the hysterical space which is no less gassed and stinking than the earth, where the roar of engines has long since deadened the music of the spheres.

But now it was the real sky which stretched out above me. The quiet sky above the quietened earth. Absolute silence. Even the sclerotic chirping of blood in my ears—the sound of a forest in the spring, which is always with me—was quiet, shamed by the great peace of the universe. And the fusion of inner and outer silence just had to give birth to something within me. I became surrounded by dear, forgotten and half-forgotten shadows. They appeared to me from the days of my earliest childhood, which I could not remember but which, it seemed, I had not entirely forgotten, from my later childhood in Akulovo and Ryazan, in the huge Moscow flat and the seething cauldron of two deep Moscow yards, from the days of my first love in hot, windy, heavenly, cornelian, pre-war Koktebel, from the days of the war and my later life, from the cemeteries which left me their graves, some known, some unknown; among them were photographers from Moscow's Chistiye Prudy Boulevard, boatmen from rivers as far apart as the Klyazma and the Angara, police-

men, greengrocers, flower-sellers and ice-cream vendors, butchers, schoolteachers, and the custodian of my childhood, Veronya, with her innumerable kith and kin. There was my mother, in the flower of her reckless youth which took her from me, and the old doctor with sunken cheeks who treated all the children in our house without charge (who, for his kindness, was repaid with torment because he was forgetful, defenceless, proud and sensitive); and at this point I think I began to cry, and I cried non-stop until I awoke, if indeed I really did cry and not just steep my dreams in imaginary tears.

And how many people there were, and there wasn't one who was superfluous, I needed them all, and I wouldn't have given up a single photographer who promised me a little bird, which never did fly out of his camera, not a single greengrocer, certainly not a single ice-cream vendor, nor a single taxi driver or frivolous young girl. But, however indulgent I might try to be, could I say I had not met evil, malevolent people, too? I had, but this was not the place for them. My imagination showed me only those who had helped me in some way in my life with a carrot, a boiled sweet in the shape of a rooster, a five-kopeck portion of ice-cream, a kind word, or a silent glance of censure. How many people we need so as to live and not break down or collapse; and I also saw those who had paid for my life with their own, my comrades-in-arms

who had not returned from the war. Then I saw myself taking part in other people's "parades"; because other people must also have moments of silence when they can look around at those who have been with them in their life, or who have simply flashed up for a second, like a spark of good, then disappeared again. How great are the links between person and person, links that we tend to forget in life's everyday bustle. "We be of one blood, thou and I"; why had the watchword of the jungles, overheard by Kipling, not become the rule of human existence? For we are so weak and powerless alone, we can do nothing if others do not help us. A truism, yes, but nothing is so easy to forget as a truism. Thank you to the kind, quiet night by the Ugra for reminding me.

I was awakened by the cock, which seemed to be crowing right in my ear. I jumped up with a heart that was beating fast: not from fright, but from joy and sadness. It seemed that since the time I gave up hunting and fishing trips, I had not heard this herald of the new life. At home I have an old English grandfather clock which chimes the hours; it's a good piece, especially in the winter mornings, when it is still dark and night is all around, then it chimes its seven measured blows to remind me that it is time to begin living, and to tell me it guarantees, totally without foundation, peace and comfort. But that is different: now I heard the cracked, hoarse

and reverberating voice of this cock, full-grown, fearless, and experienced both in battle and in love. It was a call to the fray, to heroic deeds, to youthfulness...

Then there was the forgotten cracking of the shepherd's whip, and the heavy tramping of cows as they were gathered into a herd; I raised myself up on my bed just in time to catch a glimpse of the four-headed spectre dashing out of next door's yard.

All at once came the sound of two hens clucking in triumphant panic to inform the entire world around that they had successfully done their duty. There they were in their little hollows near the fence of our other neighbours' yard. From out of the house there appeared the sleepy captain, still in his peaked cap and pea-jacket, but without his pants, and his bare, un-sunburnt legs were thrust into felt boots. He waddled over to the madly clucking hens, drove them from their hollows, and picked up a large white egg from each of them. He placed the eggs against his cheeks to feel their warmth. Then he looked sternly at the bright orange cock, which interpreted his glance as a call to action. It flapped its wings, lowered its head as if for battle, and as quick as lightning trampled on the speckled hen. For the possessor of such a harem, the cock was singularly constant and faithful. The captain went back whence he had come, caught one of his boots on the porch steps, fell down with a thud, but did not drop either of the

eggs. He picked himself up, straightened the cap which had slipped onto his nose and, after a moment's thought, gave vent to an amazingly high, strong and lengthy note, and with this howl went into the house.

The hens were now clucking all over the village, the ducks were quacking, the geese cackling, the pigeons crying and cooing, the well-handle creaking and somewhere a horse was neighing: these were ancient voices, clear and eternal. But are they really so eternal?! All this is already on the way out; and what will come to replace this way of life which has given rise to Russia's national culture?

Villages are disappearing, some of them submerged under masses of water, some simply left to decay and rot, others now no more than casual, seasonal haunts for town-dwellers. People talk about the irreversibility of the historical process, and about the benefits which come from this. It is the easiest thing in the world to foretell the future—you just try and disprove it! Who knows, maybe we can shift everything, push it all aside and turn it all inside out, but what about the Russian peasant's house? Russia's strength has always been the ploughman, and the ploughman lived in a log house.

While I was having a wash at the stand in the yard, there appeared a preoccupied Fedya Samotsvetov with an officer's map-case over his shoulder. He took out of the case a page torn from an exercise book and a thick,

office-type pencil. Pensively tapping his teeth with the pencil, he began to survey the immediate vicinity. Vera Nesterovna had told me the previous day that Fedya was a strange boy: he didn't go swimming, didn't go sailing in the leaky inflatable boat, didn't go for walks in the forest, didn't tease the girls, didn't play any games, and he lived in his own, special, carefully guarded world of books, meditation, a passion for topography (every day he prepared a new plan of the area around the house), an evasion of household jobs, and constant arguments with his cousin, the cause of which it was impossible to work out, since the two boys' interests in no way crossed. About that, in my opinion, there was no mystery, however. Opposites do not always get on together. Misha's direct, active nature must be intolerably irritated by Fedya's behaviour, while Fedya's spiritual isolation did not guarantee him a defence, because he was too vulnerable and sensitive. Any harsh words or coarseness, even the smallest injustice, would make him suffer.

In the romantic, shyly proud Misha there were the natural beginnings of a masculine heroism. But Fedya was not so easy to see. Why, when hardly yet awake, should he draw a map of the vicinity as though, without this, he could not enter the familiar world which for him, an inveterate stay-at-home, was limited to a small number of houses, vegetable gardens, fences, front gardens, sheds, outside

loos, stacks of fire-wood, clumps of trees and the growths of burdock? But every morning, with maniacal persistence, he would become lost in his monotonous, painstaking task. It is part of the foolishness of adults to foretell their children's future from the childhood occupations of those same children. By this code, Fedya was to become a topographer, cartographer or an officer of the general staff dealing not with the living world, but with its schematic representation, neutral to pity and sympathy. But it somehow seemed to me that in this "schematic" personality there was hidden an artist, an artist for whom contact with the outside world was too painful and who was trying in some way to simplify it, put it in order, subdue it, make it not so complicated and terrifying. Misha was a different matter, he was artistic in his essence; not a source of creative forces, but an object for their application. He was a swimmer, a diver, a boy of desperate scrapes; he was an extrovert, the sort who becomes either a builder or a "doer".

While I was washing, and at the same time enjoying these idle thoughts, Fedya completed his drawing. He had just managed to sign and date it when Vera Nesterovna appeared with an enamel milk can.

"Come on, run and get some milk. We'll have it fresh from the cow for breakfast."

"Why me, why not Misha?" squeaked the reply.

"He's down by the river. And I'm not going to run and get him!"

"I could go."

"Yes, you go, only not for Misha, but for the milk."

The answer to this was a long silence. Fedya was quietly exuding tears, like a cliff-face; he didn't cry, because crying was a display of internal activity and, at the same time, an expenditure of energy; people grew tired from crying, and wild wailing would rob them of the use of their legs. Fedya was just exuding tears spontaneously, from his grey eyes, some from his nose, unaccompanied by any sounds, and he was probably unaware himself of what was happening to him, as a cliff-face does not notice the dampness oozing from it. Fedya's defence was realised with the minimum expenditure of energy, and this care of himself was an undoubted, though secondary, sign of his artistic nature.

"You should be ashamed of yourself!" Vera Nesterovna pressed him. "Surely you can bring a can of milk for breakfast?"

The world was once more importunate, harsh and unjust, and Fedya turned to active defence.

"I'm not big enough," he muttered hoarsely and piteously. "It's too heavy for me."

"Don't tell lies. You carry water from the well, and how!"

"That's with Misha... And ... and water's

different!" the exudation noticeably increased.

"How is it different?"

"It's very different! Milk is fatty; but water's empty, it's got a lower specific gravity."

"What?.. What?.."

"I mean it!.. Dunya's cow's a Yaroslav breed, its milk is four point nought three percent fat. You just try carrying it!"

"Of all the..." Vera Nesterovna began in perplexity. "You're driving me crazy. I need a cigarette. Alright, I'll go for it myself!"

And the spring of tears dried up at once, the cliff-face ceased to exude. Fedya quietly sauntered away, following a path marked on his new and accurate map. He was soon by the outside loo, where he disappeared.

He remained there just long enough to allow Misha Knyazhevich to return from the river. Fedya had correctly deduced that Vera Nesterovna would be too lazy to go for the milk herself, and that the bracing smoke of a cigarette would suggest to her a counter-argument. As the unsuspecting Misha arrived, the milkcan was thrust into his hand, with the order: one foot here, the next one there...

"What about Fedya?" he asked gloomily.

"What's Fedya got to do with it? I said,—go!"

Misha took the can and set off along the path which led past the loo. There he pulled firmly at the handle of the door, which was bolted.

"Just you wait, you sod!"

He disappeared behind the fence and then I saw, in among the burdock, a familiar figure dashing after him through the prickly shoots with the agility of a weasel...

Our humble breakfast was very much protracted by Knyazhevich and Samotsvetov, the one reading Sartre, the other deeply absorbed in *Astrology for All*. They both stabbed with their forks at their food, mostly missing it, and they spilled their milk, to the howls of Vera Nesterovna. And I almost missed an instructive spectacle.

All the younger population of our microworld had gathered by the house next door, where the gallant captain in full dress—cap, jacket, woollen pants now lowered to his galoshes—was pensively and powerfully peeing onto the burdock, the elder-berry tree, the fence, the shed, the piglet, the hens, the head—still green—of the sunflower, as well as onto the kitten which had been unwary enough to enter the irrigation zone.

"He drinks buckets," Fedya whispered at my back. There was a trace of deep respect in his voice.

"Can you put it on the roof?" Misha asked him.

The mighty warrior didn't even look round, he calmly directed his nozzle upwards, and the golden stream began to rattle on the wooden roof.

"What about into the chimney?"

The stream shot upwards and came down as a shower at the foot of the soot-stained chimney.

"You should have said earlier," the sailor grumbled unhappily. "There's no pressure left."

He gave his last to whatever was near him, then pulled up his pants. The children all disappeared in a flash, like sparrows. Vera Nesterovna was standing by the porch and comforting Fedya, who had again turned into a tear-exuding cliff-face.

"What are you whimpering for? It's not like a man. You should give him tit-for-tat, he'd hit you, I'd hit him... How I'd give him what for!" she concluded bloodthirstily.

From somewhere up above we heard a shout, and all turned our heads to see Knyazhevich flying down from the sky. He really was flying, or at least, getting ready to land, his legs flexed outwards and with a look of terror in his eyes. Only when he had landed on the roof of the house, slightly damaging it, did we guess what had happened. After getting even with Fedya he felt it best to disappear for a time, but without going too far from his own home. The best thing for this purpose was the tall weeping birch which stretched its branches over the house. There he could sit things out quietly in the dense foliage; but he had an interest in listening to whatever tales the artful cry-baby Samotsvetov would tell, and in learning what retribu-

tion he could expect. Misha had begun to clamber carefully along a bough which, though thick and apparently strong, proved to be rotten. It broke off.

Misha was now standing on the roof, his arms proudly akimbo, and we, shaken and perplexed, were looking up at him from below. Masha, forgetting all caution in her enchantment, was dancing and clapping her hands with delight; her eyes, now a precious blue, were gleaming.

"You here?" Vera Nesterovna turned on her. "Again without permission?"

The little girl hung her head; and her eyes, reflecting the grass, were filled with green anguish.

"She's been hanging about all morning," Samotsvetov informed against her. For some reason he now ceased to exude his tears.

"I don't want any of your tales!" Vera Nesterovna snapped.

Masha slowly walked away, looking lost, preparing to hide somewhere not far away.

"Misha, you devil, come down here," Vera Nesterovna's voice sounded just a little tired. "I want to box your ears."

Misha made no reply to this tempting suggestion; he continued to stand, squeamishly pouting his lower lip and despising us, as only a son of Heaven can despise pitiful earthlings.

"Misha, get down, your mamma wants to give you a black eye," Vera Nesterovna

beseeched him.

Misha was unmoved, and he retained his height, in both the literal and figurative senses of the word.

"You'll fall, you fool, and you'll break an arm or a leg. Get down, my dear, I won't harm you... Oh well, damn you!" and Vera Nesterovna reached for her cigarettes. "As though I need you, you're just a nuisance. You live there on the roof, me and your father'll have another one."

But this did not suit Misha, he wanted to remain an only son. He darted through the attic window, and in a moment he was on the ground with us. But his mother had already forgotten about him and was now interested in why *vers libre* had not become a feature of Russian poesy. I did not know the answer to this, but Grazius—who persisted in playing the angler and disappearing all day by the river—happened to be near and he began to explain that many Russian poets used and still use *vers libre*...

The rest of the day passed quietly, if we don't count the presence at supper of a man about whom Grazius and I had forgotten. He was sitting, buried in a thick folio, and didn't raise his head to greet us, he simply muttered something indistinctly welcoming. I deduced that this was Vera Nesterovna's husband. It was difficult to remember him, as he was for ever shaving off and re-growing his goatee beard. He was a leading light in endocri-

nology, by virtue of which (by the law of contrasts) he spent most of his time translating Livy from the Latin. Also, he often suffered from sciatica, and it was a result of his latest attack that we had not yet seen him on our visit. With his particular complaint, it was quite natural that he should spend his holidays walking up mountains. But the most surprising part of all this was that this silent and invisible man was the true head of the family, and not the thunderous warrior queen, Vera Nesterovna. He might not seem to interfere with anything in the household, but the family wagon rolled along at his will and discretion. And it was even more difficult to believe that Vera Nesterovna was happy with him.

I noticed that Grazius, who himself was not quite real, was embarrassed and intimidated by the appearance of this semi-phantom. I recalled Wilde's Canterville ghost, which was afraid of apparitions...

And again there was a beautiful night, and a cock-crowing morning...

Grazius finally tempted me to go fishing. He had been at his post at sunrise and at sunset, but without success. That surprised me, because whatever Grazius turned his hand to, he was always certain to be successful; and if, in the clear, full waters of the Ugra, there was even just one little tiddler, it would surely end

up in Grazius' net. "Since they don't bite when they're supposed to," Grazius concluded wisely, "then we'll have to try them when they're not supposed to." We therefore set off in the car along the familiar track through the forest, through the mosquito, horse-fly and gadfly forest, to the place where we had bathed not two days earlier. In the corridor of the forest the winged devils stuck to the windscreen in such a thick layer that we lost sight of the track. And no matter how carefully Grazius drove, the car gave such a jolt once that I almost made a hole in the roof with my head. The driver was uninjured. "And they say that car's made of tin-plate!" he commented. "It's armour-plate, man! But your skull's pretty tough as well," he added approvingly, as we rushed out of the forest's dimness into the light of day.

It was a true pleasure to watch Grazius setting up the fishing tackle and inflating the boat; since I had two left hands, he didn't let me touch anything. Grazius has amazingly skilful hands, and with his slim, pale, freckled fingers he can truly perform miracles: he can repair any apparatus, or glue together a shattered china vase so that you won't see the joints, he is a master at restoring icons, paintings and antique furniture, he is inimitable at card tricks requiring sleight of hand, he can make objects disappear, and he need only make a few lightning passes and the objects re-appear as if out of thin air. It is awful to

even dream it of the crystal-pure Grazius, but I think we have lost a genius of a card-sharp in him.

No sleight of hand, however, will help if there are no fish in the river. We tried fishing by the bank, in the shallows, in the main channel, in the deeps, we found a whirlpool, choppy water, eddies, the lot: but not a single bite. We baited with worms, ordinary flies, dragon-flies, millet gruel and bread, everything brought along by the far-sighted Grazius, we tried spoon-bait, but all in vain. And yet there was one tiddler in the river, and it was Grazius who caught it.

"Oh Lord!" Grazius exclaimed as he returned the tiddler to its element. "Moby Dick! The white whale!"

I followed his gaze. Between the branches of the weeping willows that hung over the water, in the speckled brilliance of the river there was a huge and beautiful creature—a white cachalot—now rising up, now sinking down, and it was coming towards us, a fresh-water, Central Russian incarnation of Melville's fantasy. It snorted up fountains of spray, it rocked the calm waters of the river from bank to bank as it drew near, and when it came clear of the trees it turned into our dear hostess Vera Nesterovna, swimming butterfly.

Behind her, unable to keep up, breathing hard and struggling hard against the current, there came a proud little baby whale by the

name of Misha Knyazhevich. This was in the spirit of Vera Nesterovna: she could not stand senseless bravado, but she allowed any test of character, any harsh trial of will-power. If he wanted to swim with her, then fine, let him swim, let him suffer, he wouldn't drown with her there, but if he weakened, if it turned out he was just a braggart or a coward, then let him climb out onto the bank and languish there with his inferiority. But Misha was a proud boy, he swam himself almost into a state of oblivion, he floundered, he would close his eyes, lie on his back, and then start swimming again; and he swam ashore with the last of his breath, following his mother out of the water. He was blue and shivering, but unbroken. Nevertheless, he did not come near us immediately, giving himself time to get his breath back by the bank and shake the shivering out of his body.

"Is it fish for supper then?" Vera Nesterovna asked. Lavish nature had given this marvellous woman enough young flesh for all the naiads of the Oka basin.

"Only if it's tinned nothotenia," Grazius answered, putting up his tackle.

"Eelpout and pristipoma, you mean," Vera Nesterovna enjoined. "Why is it that all modern fish sound as though they come from a brothel?"

"The virtuous ones have all died out," Grazius explained. "So now we go after the profligate creatures."

Misha approached with an independent air, but covered in goose-pimples. He rarely laughed, and even when he smiled it seemed he didn't have enough skin on his face for a proper smile; but now he opened his mouth slightly and gave voice to some crackling notes; he bent himself double at the waist, as though he had a pain in his stomach; he was laughing.

"Have you overdone the swimming, my dear?" Vera Nesterovna asked worriedly. "Are you alright?"

"Barge haulers!" he just managed to mutter.

Following his gaze, we discovered a strange procession: a file of children heading for the river, one after the other, and all fastened together with a piece of string. At the head was Masha, and behind her came four others, each one smaller than the one in front. The chain was completed by a most pitiful creature in a short, loose jacket: its bare, uncertain legs were for ever stumbling, the creature would fall and be dragged along the ground until it somehow managed to pick itself up onto all fours and from thence onto two legs; whereupon it straightaway fell down again. With all this it neither cried nor made any complaint.

"Poor little fellow!" Vera Nesterovna said pityingly.

"It's not a fellow," Misha objected. "It's a she."

The unrelenting leader of this feeble gang turned towards us and everyone else obediently followed suit, except that the "she" in the rear again fell over and travelled some distance along the river bank on her backside. Two paces away from us the procession stopped and swayed backwards slightly: the little one had grasped hold of a juniper bush and had acted as an over-sharp brake.

"Barge haulers should sing," Misha commented. "Why aren't you singing?"

Masha looked in devotion and confusion at her handsome tormentor; she didn't know what barge haulers were, and didn't understand what he meant.

"Well!" Vera Nesterovna interrupted with a voice of danger. "What does all this mean?"

"Mamma's gone to Polotnyany Zavod," Masha said. "And she tied us all together, so we wouldn't get lost."

"So you up and went for a walk!"

"Well, what of it? We're all here, no one's got lost."

"Oh, your mother'll wallop you!"

Masha shook her head; she was talking to Vera Nesterovna, but her eyes, now the colour of ivory, were fixed on Misha.

"She won't."

"I don't know why you do it! You're running around again, and you've even dragged the little one with you."

"What could I do? We're all tied together!"

"You could have stayed at home... Why has

your mother gone to Polotnyany Zavod?" Vera Nesterovna's culture-loving soul was worried by the artist's—Masha's mother's—sudden sortie to the nest of the Goncharovs: maybe there was a new museum opened there, or at least an exhibition connected with Pushkin's days at Polotnyany Zavod.

"She's gone for food and wine," the girl answered. "It's our wake today."

"What wake?"

"For our dad. It's three years today. You'll be invited as well. Mamma'll come herself, or she'll send me with a polite note... Why haven't you got any tattoos," she asked Misha.

"What for?" Misha growled between his teeth.

"They're nice! Sailors always have tattoos."

"I'm not a sailor, stupid!"

"But don't you want to be a sailor when you grow up?"

I thought she was having us on; but no, she was just dreaming aloud.

"What for?" asked Misha.

"I would like to hear a greater lexical variety from you," his mother remarked. "What's the matter, have you forgotten how to use your tongue properly?"

"Why does she keep pestering me?" Misha retorted heatedly.

"That's enough. I'm fed up with the lot of you. Come here and I'll untie you all."

"You won't know how," Masha said, and

her eyes turned to the colour of forget-me-nots from the light blue of Vera Nesterovna's swimming costume. "It's a sailor's knot. Mamma learnt it from dad."

"I could, of course, undo it," Grazius said quietly. "But is it worth it? At least, this way they won't get lost."

"Oh well, company, step lively, homewards," Vera Nesterovna announced decisively. "And we'll swim back to our things. Are you up to it?" she asked her son.

Thinking it beneath his dignity to give a reply, Misha walked towards the water.

Mother and son were soon out of sight as they now swam with the current. The gang of barge haulers turned around and wandered off homewards, broiling in the mid-day sun...

Opposite us there lived a red-cheeked old woman with ailing, swollen legs. In the mornings she would creep out of the house, though she was hardly able to put one foot in front of the other. Holding on to the door-post, the fence around the front garden, and the branches of the lilac bushes, she would make her way to the bench outside her gate, and settle there for the day. She would return to the house towards evening, when her small, lively and unusually nimble daughter Nyurka—mostly aptly known by the sobriquet of "the Flea"—arrived from work. The old woman herself had probably been as nimble and ebullient as her daughter at one time, which

you might guess from the lively smile with which she responded to all the impressions from the life flowing around her. Her light, young smile was exceptionally rich in its expressiveness: it could be merry or worried, full of curiosity or puzzlement, or it might be wonderfully sad. She liked any show of activity in the people around her, whether they were going to the forest, to the river, to the fields, the farm or the shop, whether they were going visiting one another or going to the cross-roads to get a lift from a passing car to rush off into the endless distance: to Polotnyany Zavod, to Medyn, or even to Kaluga. She went with them with all her heart, not envying them, not complaining against the fate which chained her to the spot.

One time I caught something in her rich array of smiles which made me approach her. We exchanged greetings, and I sat down on the bench.

"Do you like it here?" she asked.

"I do. Only there are a lot of mosquitoes."

"We're on high ground, and it's dry," she answered. "There never used to be any mosquitoes. Then they turned up. Not for long, they were biting for a week maybe, then they went away again. But in the last few years it's terrible how many there are. Where do they all come from? Maybe from outer space?"

I shrugged my shoulders. The old woman was happy, and glowed with her smiles.

"I thought of that all by myself," she said,

"and you don't contradict. Nowadays there's lots of things that happen, that didn't used to. On the other side of our vegetable garden, when the thunder comes, we get blue sparks running along the ground, like there were little animals playing there."

"Perhaps there's some iron ore there?"

"We thought it might be gold. Nyurka started digging, but she didn't find anything. Just soil, dung and worms. Last year we had a scholar living in our lean-to, for the late mushroom season. Anyway, he said the Earth was in a sort of shell, but the shell was full of holes with all the rockets that have gone up. Now all sorts of terrible things come pouring in, plagues and what have you. My daughter heard a lecture where she works about that ... er ... alcohol. They reckoned up that every living person, from a babe to a doddery old man, should have a hundred grammes of vodka a day. So why don't they give us it? It's because there are some adults who are in it up to their eyeballs as it is."

I said I didn't see the connection.

"It's all because of radiation," she explained. "It's got very strong nowadays. That's not my words, it was the scholar who said it, the one who was here for the mushrooms."

Who knows, maybe that was right. We're not responsible for anything ourselves. Radiation's increased and we've started getting drunk; stop the radiation and we'll sober up.

"Now don't you go drinking with Alexei

Timofeyevich. His young bride doesn't like it."

Why, after a solitary and totally innocent conversation, did everyone suspect us of having made an alcoholic pact? I assured the old woman that we had not talked about alcohol, and that anyway I was not a drinking man.

"There's no one's a drinking man," she sighed with an understanding smile. "Only where do all the drunks come from? His young bride says it's enough having one pestilence in the house, she won't have another. Have you seen the state Vasili rolls home in? He knows they won't give him any at home, so he fills up to the limit at work. Alexei Timofeyevich's young bride takes every last kopeck off him, and she doesn't get a bottle in except for special occasions. That's why he's always on the lookout."

I repeated that I did not intend to lead him away from the straight and narrow.

"You just beware!" the old woman smiled mysteriously. "His young bride is a sorceress."

How amazingly apt was this pantomime word for that glum and stocky gnome!

"She's a witch," the old woman lowered her voice. "An enchantress."

"Who has she put a spell on?"

"Why, me," she answered simply. "She took away my legs."

"What did she do that for?"

"Alexei Timofeyevich, when his wife died, he had his eye on me. He did, you know. Of course, I respect him, but to ... to the devil with him! But you see, his young bride got wind of it. She's a woman of perception, and she put a spell on me. In fact, she only has the one curse: to take away a person's faculties."

"How do you mean?"

"Just that. Simka next door found a trough that someone had thrown out. At the other end of the village. It was a wonderful trough, just right for sheep. The young bride was passing by once, and she saw it; it's terrible how grasping she is about things like that. 'What a wonderful trough!' she says. 'What did you pay for it?' Simka was a fool, she should have told a lie, but she didn't think, and she admitted she'd found it. The young bride looked at her, sort of friendly like, but her eyes were green with envy. 'Some people are so lucky!' she says. And she began to stroke the trough gently. Then what do you think? Since then no sheep or pig will drink or eat out of that trough... Another time the young bride called on Nadyoga in her vegetable garden. Now, no one ever had vegetables like Nadyoga used to grow. The way she worked the soil, it was something fierce. The young bride looked around at her vegetable beauties, frowned, sat down and began to sift the soil through her fingers. 'What lovely soil! Your soil is so lovely!' She was full of praise,

but Nadyoga was sick at heart. And she's never wanted to work in her garden again. Her legs just wouldn't go there. And when she did make herself go, everything fell apart in her hands. Now she's resigned herself to it. Now her garden's just full of weeds. So you see, you'd better not go upsetting the young bride!"

"Why can't she charm her step-son out of his drink, then?"

"You see, it's not part of her power. She can make sober men go head-over-heels, but to straighten up a wrong 'un—she's no power. She can't even help herself, she's bustling around all hours God sends. She's only got the one speciality—taking away people's faculties."

She gave me a cunning look, and burst into laughter that was merry and alluring; it was probably the way she had laughed in her younger days, when the earth was hot under her light feet...

Back in the house I found Vera Nesterovna sitting on her haunches in front of Fedya Samotsvetov, shaking him and urging:

"Just tell me you're lying. Admit it, I won't hurt you."

"I wrote it!" replied Fedya, doomed but stolid.

Seeing me, Vera Nesterovna stood up and thrust into my hand a familiar piece of paper, a page torn from an exercise book. Instead of the expected map of the locality, it contained a poem.

"This impertinent rascal says he wrote it himself!"

I read the poem:

There's a rain within my heart,
Which is open, unprotected.
Who knows: when did it start,
This feeling so dejected?

Uninvited came my woe;
Unasked—my heart's dismay!
How dare my spirits be so low,
And joy to me say nay?!

It is not from hate's dour crime,
Nor yet from love's lost season.
'Tis a pain without a rhyme,
And a pain without a reason.

"An excellent poem. It's Verlaine."

"I knew it! And you, you little toad, you wrote a poem by Verlaine?"

I expected that the pouring forth of salty moisture would begin, but the cliff-face remained dry and firm.

"What of it?" Samotsvetov said challengingly. "It may be Verlaine's. But if a chimpanzee re-arranges the letters of the alphabet five hundred thousand million times, it'll come up with *The Forsyte Saga*. So am I any worse than a chimpanzee? I'm five hundred times cleverer, and I've written only the one little poem. Compare it with *War and Peace*, and

look how much shorter it is. Multiply one by the other, and divide it into five hundred thousand million, and what are you left with? Rubbish!"

"He's trying to make a fool of me again," Vera Nesterovna said helplessly. "What are you on about? What chimpanzee ever came up with *The Forsyte Saga*?"

"A resus," Samotsvetov answered cheekily.

"So why did you leave out a stanza?" I asked.

"I'm only small!" came the familiar, unpleasant intonation. "It's hard enough for me as it is."

"If it's so hard for you, don't try writing poetry!" Vera Nesterovna took up the educational reins once more. "We'll just have to give you a good whipping, you miserable plagiarist!"

"You can't!" the plagiarist objected. "I'm not yours."

"When I feed you, do your washing, put you to bed, then you're mine. But when I want to box your ears, you're not?"

"You don't have to feed me, do my washing, or put me to bed..." and the cliff-face began to ooze.

"Oh, stop it! Just promise you won't do it again, and then be off with you."

Vera Nesterovna was wanting to capitulate on honourable terms, but Samotsvetov showed no magnanimity.

"I'm going to write *Gyena the Crocodile*

next," he promised sadistically.

"Well, any silly chimpanzee could write that! Now, get lost!" Watching him go, Vera Nesterovna added thoughtfully: "I really should have walloped him, but it was such a good poem he pinched..."

Masha's mother sent us the "polite" invitation. This time Masha didn't have to force her way through the burdock, or hide among the bushes; she approached openly, with the dignity and ceremony of a herald assured of her impunity. And she was dazzlingly pretty, wearing a neatly-pressed blue frock, a white blouse, and a ribbon in her hair. She was received with all the necessary honours, led into the house, and treated to a drink of 'Baikal' lemonade and a chocolate. While Vera Nesterovna was writing her letter of thanks in reply, Masha, glass in hand, walked around the house and asked about each book and piece of boyish rubbish that she saw, things like a catapult, a bow and arrow, a boat made from pine-bark, or just bits of metal: "Is it Misha's?" In the event of confirmation, the object in question would be subjected to careful scrutiny, but everything that belonged to Samotsvetov was spurned disdainfully.

Misha now ran in, his hair still damp from his swim, and he was taken aback by the presence of the pretty stranger. But then he recognised her, and was filled with angry confusion. A few minutes later we looked

through the window and saw the mirror-image of a familiar picture: Masha was going away proudly along the path, and the erstwhile so proud boy was tearing his skin among the burdock.

It was a sultry evening and the sunset, oppressed by dark clouds, was an anxious and fiery red; in the east the lightning flashes merged into one another, and the distant thunder came to us as a dull and sleepy mumbling. In response to the invitation we were on our way to visit the artist, Masha's mother, at the other end of the village.

Vera Nesterovna told us that we should call our hostess simply Katya, as she was still young and didn't like formalities. Her husband had died in an accident, leaving her with three children born, and another on the way. After some time a fifth appeared. This she needed to survive; she had no plans to remarry. The art which she practiced was all in the applied genres: ceramics, batik, the design and even the sewing of dresses from cloth which she herself dyed. Katya's dresses were highly sought-after in fashionable Moscow circles. She had no family other than her children. Her own parents were dead, and her mother-in-law had broken with her for "not keeping her son safe". She had bought her present house after her husband's death, she had added a studio with her own hands, she worked like one possessed, she fed, clothed

and washed her horde, and still found time to read, visit exhibitions and go to the theatre.

"So we don't have to put on a lean face, sigh and think to ourselves..." Grazius stopped, realising that he was about to blunder into something extremely untactful. This was not in keeping with his gracious essence, but the fear that he was going to be called upon to be sympathetic or, at the very least, would be wearisomely reminded of someone else's misfortune, had undermined his usual self-control.

"That's enough," Vera Nesterovna frowned. "Our hostess is a strong and intelligent woman. And don't forget—no balm or incense."

We were striding cheerfully along the wide and interminable village street, past well-built houses that were all boarded up, past houses that were cheered only by the artificial and temporary life of holiday visitors, past houses that still breathed with constant occupation and gave off the smell of cattle, smoke, baking, and the warmth of homeliness, like something maternal. Were these smells really doomed to disappear, the breath of cows in their stalls and the sleepy tramping of hooves, the proficient suitability of these log dwellings for habitation in all weathers, and the joyful heat of a Russian stove?

The artist's house was in turmoil: one of the children, either by mistake or ignorance, had let the rabbits out of their cage. As yet

these rabbits were no more than general pets, but their future held a key to an improvement in the family's well-being.

"Where have they got to?" Grazius asked.

"The large female, I don't know; but the male and the other female are hiding somewhere in the yard."

Our hostess's round, healthily pale and clear face, under its crown of light brown plaits, expressed genuine though slightly naive distress. Her wide, colourful overall covered a fullness of figure worthy of Kustodiev*; she had a bright, fresh mouth and uneven teeth.

"There's no use looking for the large female," Grazius said. "That villain had her for lunch."

A large mongrel was looking at us ingratiatingly, licking its lips carnivorously and just a little nervously. Judging by its muzzle and hanging lips, and by the yellow patches on its white fur, its ancestors included a pointer.

"You're right," Katya said weakly. "That's why he hasn't been begging to be fed today. He doesn't belong to anyone, and feeds on the Lord knows what... You swine, and you've even got the nerve to lick your lips!" She picked up a stick and flung it at the dog.

The dog drew up its backside, but didn't move from the spot. This was strange, as

* Boris Kustodiev (1878–1927)—Russian artist, famous for his portraits of healthy, corpulent merchants' wives.—*Ed.*

mongrels are generally very sensitive to any intention to use them ill. Perhaps its lack of fear had something to do with its noble ancestors? While I was indulging in such idle thoughts, Grazius was drawing conclusions:

"He senses supper, which is why he is licking his lips. The love-pair must be somewhere not far away."

Grazius looked around and made for the shed.

"They're not in there!" Katya sighed. "We've been through it with a tooth-comb... Who is he, your perceptive friend?"

"He's a famous rabbit-catcher," I answered.

Grazius came out of the shed, gently holding two rabbits in his arms: one was white with black ears, the other was straw-coloured.

"Miracle of miracles!" Katya exclaimed. "Half the village have hunted for them in there."

"Things come to my hands of their own accord," Grazius gave a faint smile.

"I know what you mean," Katya answered seriously. "But a rabbit is not a thing."

"I mean thing, not as an everyday term, but as a philosophical concept. Something abiding in the world. In this way a thing can be a rabbit, a child, or a woman."

"You are dangerous," Katya said. "You put them in their cage, and I'll just bring in the washing; it's about to rain."

We helped her take down the small clothes hanging up to dry: vests, pants, socks.

The narrow table was placed end-on to the wall, and on it were set out glasses of wine and a home-made cake. We were sitting in the kitchen, and heard the gentle breathing of the children asleep in the next room. There was no door, its place being taken by a home-spun curtain which did not reach the floor. Then there was the sound of bare little feet slapping on the floor.

"Damn the girl!" Katya said angrily. "She gives me no peace."

"What can you do if she wants to go you know where?" Vera Nesterovna spoke up for the "damned" girl.

"She just wants to eavesdrop."

In the space between the curtain and the floor we saw the bare feet carefully creep away and stop by the door-post.

"And the fool thinks we can't see her," Katya laughed.

"Quiet!"

"D'you think we'll frighten her off? She's got the curiosity of a magpie."

With deft, precise movements Katya divided up the cake between us.

"Let's drink to his memory."

We drank the wine without clinking glasses.

"Perhaps I'd better tell you how he died, or else you'll be thinking about it anyway. And I don't want that."

They had been in a house just outside Moscow. One day they came back from swimming in the river, they were barefoot and almost

naked. The light had gone in the cellar, so her husband took the portable light on a long lead, and went to fix it. He didn't see that the lead was almost worn through. Katya heard him cry out. When she rushed down the steps, he looked as if a black snake had wrapped itself round him. She managed to tear the lead away, but it was too late. It was only by a miracle that she herself was not electrocuted.

"God had mercy. But that's not everything." Despite the calmness of her voice, it was clear that she had not found it easy to get over the breakdown of her life. "I mustn't be afraid of anything. My husband taught me that. He lived without fear: he went swimming, spent the winter on ice-floes, nearly got himself drowned, went missing without trace. And what a namby-pamby sort of death!"

There was a rustle behind the curtain. A thick encyclopaedia lay on the floor, with a little bare foot on either side of it.

"Eavesdropping with all mod cons," Katya commented. "Let her! You can't hide anything from children anyway... I'm afraid for them, not for myself. They run off, crawl off, disappear, and then I think of the black snake. And that no-good chicken is always hanging round your house, 'til I'm worried sick..."

"I send her back home whenever I see her," Vera Nesterovna interrupted quickly.

"It's not your fault," Katya waved the interruption aside. "It's me, I too much want

them to be safe. It's natural, but it's also a bad thing. If they grow up to be cowards, then I'll have betrayed him," and she looked away to the end of the table.

"That's enough whining," she went on. "As the Americans say: don't tell me your troubles, I've got enough of my own."

"That sounds awful," Vera Nesterovna shook her shoulders.

"I'm not sure. We do so like to put our burdens on someone else's shoulders. At least for a while, just for a minute. But it's mean and, more important, it doesn't get us anywhere. No one takes on anything that isn't his own. For that you have to love a person. And that's a rarity. I was loved. Why don't you tell me to put a sock in it? As though I've got nothing else to talk about but myself... The privilege of the hostess. Let's talk about something different. Khokhloma* perhaps? Do you like khokhloma?" she asked, turning to Grazius. "Do you think it is a living art form?"

Grazius said that he didn't like fossilised art. They began arguing, but in the heat of the debate Masha, falling asleep, fell to the floor.

"Now, at least, I know how to put her to sleep." Katya went into the next room, picked up her daughter, gave her a hard slap

* Khokhloma—decorative designs painted on wooden articles, such as spoons, bowls, furniture, etc.—*Tr.*

and put her back to bed. Then she took another of the children to pot, and we heard the lightly ringing stream of liquid.

Hardly had our hostess returned to the table than the eavesdropping service renewed its activities.

"Let's open the champagne," Katya suggested. "Thank you for coming. Today is an up-hill day for me. I've been saying some foolish things. It's easier you being here."

Holding the cork, Grazius let the air slowly out of the bottle so as not to frighten the children, and he poured out the foaming drink into our glasses.

We clinked glasses, drank up, kissed our hostess and went out into the dry, electricity-filled night, a night lit with silent lightning...

The storm eventually came after we were all asleep...

The last morning of our stay in Myatlevo began, as usual, with the crowing of next door's cock. On this occasion its voice was lower and more husky, and was not carried far and wide to die away slowly on the air; rather, it was spent in the confined space between our two houses, the echo dampened by the post-storm moisture in the air and the mist hanging over the dew. Hardly did I have time to regret that we were to leave Myatlevo in miserable weather, than broad, beaming rays of sun broke through the light covering

of cloud, and they soon joined together into a single stream.

Our parting day brought much that was unexpected.

The sailor in his grey pants at last poured forth into the chimney, which was unanimously agreed to be a world record. The valorous fellow did not rest on his laurels, and set himself the aim of hitting the dark mole on the birch trunk, just under the starling-house. Samotsvetov composed a new poem, even better than the last, and this time the letters came out as Byron's *Stanzas to Augusta*. Vera Nesterovna was at first delighted, but then flew into a rage and demanded that the boy once and for all strangled his urge to write words that were not his own. Fedya promised nothing, but threw out an aside to the effect that in the near future, at least, he would have no time for poetry, since he had to draw a map of the locality as far as the Ugra.

We took a walk to the river, to the steep bank just at the back of the houses. The place was full of children and the sailor, filled with glory, was giving vague details of his morning's feat. Misha, as was his wont, was storming the heights, climbing the trees which overhung the river. Others were swimming or building a castle out of wet sand, and two were concentrating on drowning in the leaky inflatable boat. Samotsvetov appeared with his map-case, but was moving rather uncertainly; his map, drawn up hastily, was obviously

giving him inaccurate bearings. Then a handsome, bright-eyed creature came down the bank of grass and wild geraniums; she came unhurriedly, freely, openly.

"Masha!" Vera Nesterovna exclaimed, taken aback. "You naughty girl! Who said you could come here?"

"Mamma," came the polite, even ceremonious, reply.

"How do you mean: mamma?"

"Mamma... She said, you go where you want, I'm not your keeper."

"I see," Vera Nesterovna whispered.

Masha went behind a hazel bush and reappeared from there in pants and bra of coloured calico. The unfilled cups of the bra were touchingly crumpled, but the little girl didn't notice this, and would have hardly guessed that it could be otherwise. And yet her small body, her movements, her gait, and even the waving of her eye-lashes gave a mysterious foretaste of a different image that would come in many years' time. And, as though in answer to this future transformation, a slim boy gave out a wearisome howl and flung himself out of a tree into the river. It was not a fall, but a flight: the river was reflecting the sky, and it was the sky to which the boy was rushing.

This time would pass, a time so slow if counted in days, even slower in hours, so quick in years, and quite fleeting in decades; and children's games would be replaced by

passions, storms of love and jealousy, gains and losses; but all that will happen not in my world. And do I want repetition? A stupid question: you can't step twice into the same river. And anyway, there's no point. Children's games are charming, but they are not my games. In the life that I have lived there is nothing I would change, or repeat. Every experience has exhausted itself to the bottom. Perhaps that is what a happy life is? I had never before thought about my hard life like that. Perhaps that was what I had come to Myatlevo to learn?

I was filled with a rare calm. I watched the resilient, apparently immobile Ugra, which was in reality in constant and fairly swift flow, and I thought of another river which, despite its pale, standing waters, you still couldn't cross twice. Sooner or later you would find yourself on the banks of this river, where a gaunt and gloomy old man would be waiting to ferry you to the other side, a place from where no one ever returns. And if, in the remainder of my days, I do not spill the tranquility which came upon me by the Ugra, then I shall say with a firm voice:

"Set to with a will, Charon. There'll be extra for your pains."

AN UNWRITTEN STORY BY SOMERSET MAUGHAM

In 1960, in a small resort town on the southern coast of France, I had the good fortune to meet Somerset Maugham. The story below is based on my impressions of that meeting, which unexpectedly turned into a confiding conversation...

The Author

When I met him he had already made his summing-up and laid down his pen. Obviously he was being hasty when he did this, a quarter of a century ago, thinking no doubt that he, a thin, weak-chested man with many illnesses, was not destined to live to a biblical old age. Actually his pen was to serve him faithfully for a long time yet...

I was filled with a feeling of indescribable tenderness and acute anxiety as I regarded the fearful fragility of the man who had given us so much and so generously.

Almost with tears in my eyes I looked at this shriveled, refined gentleman who had created so many wonders. Everything about him suggested the height of elegance: a blue summer jacket, slim light-colored trousers with razor-sharp creases, an unabashedly bright ascot around his neck and a beautiful, massive watchband which kept sliding to his thin wrist covered with dark speckles.

He almost never left Riviera where he lived, warming himself in the hot sun of the Mediterranean. But once a year he journeyed to London to renew his wardrobe. He ordered his suits from the best tailor, his shoes from the best shoemaker, and chose with particular care his ties and handkerchiefs for the breast pocket. There was nothing ridiculous about the dandyism of the old man, aged ninety, if only because it had enabled him to dress his characters (especially his heroines) with a refinement that is to be met with only in Balzac and Proust.

Looking at Maugham I did not wonder that he had lived so long, but that he had done so much and so brilliantly. Here was a man who lived a full life to the very end. However, he himself might think differently on the subject.

"Throughout my life," Maugham told me then, "and many consider it a long life (in

this they are very much mistaken), I have learned almost nothing. What I was able to do at the beginning is what has remained with me. Is my latest novel really better written than *The Moon and Sixpence*? I penned quite a bit of nonsense at a time when I was trying to establish myself as a writer, but in terms of craftsmanship that was no worse than my later things. And can one really speak of a writer developing, growing over the years? A writer's craftsmanship improves, though at the cost of losing his natural spontaneity. Are the later novels of Dickens, Hamsun, Fallada better than their earlier ones? Of course one can find examples of the opposite: Turgenev and Hemingway, to mention just two. But these are all exceptions. The rule is: a writer is born, once and for all."

"Then why at one point did you stop writing novels and turn to memoirs instead?"

"It is extraordinarily pleasant to write novels when they come to the pen naturally, and it is extraordinarily pleasant not to write them when they do not. Then you savour every minute of your life." He stopped short. "What is this? Bad poetry or a banality that was suddenly born within me? When you are writing a prose work you either close your eyes to the surrounding world because it lies outside your subject, or you look at it strictly for what you can get out of it that is of use to you: you look for details, fish out what is needed, you poke about much like the scaveng-

er at the dump who hopes to find a silver spoon, a signet-ring or a coin in a heap of rubbish. You do not live by the surrounding world, you live off it like a parasite. And when the spirit is free from any set schemes, everything becomes a source of joy and wonder: the freshness of the grass, raindrops on the branches, birds, the color and smell of wild strawberries, everything becomes a well-spring of happiness...

"What is good about creative work is that it gives you an illusion of getting close to yourself. Do you know what gave me the greatest satisfaction when I sat down to write a new novel? Trying on a new mask—that was how the critics called my habit of giving the role of the narrator to someone who is not exactly I myself. But when I did appear under my own name, they said it was only a more subtle form of self-disguise. In reality it is not like that at all. One cannot know oneself from the inside. But one learns something about oneself as one comes into contact or conflict with other people or becomes close to them. I have been very much alone all my life, and so have had little opportunity of looking at myself through the eyes of friends and relations, people who actually feel the pressure of my personality. One has to be reflected in somebody, only then does one see something in oneself. The main characters of my stories serve as mirrors in which I look at myself."

"Why not simply remain oneself?" I said.

"And what is 'oneself'? That is just what needs to be discovered. The narrator is more interesting to me than any other character. If I knew myself, or rather if I thought I did, I would never have written in the first person."

"But you have not always written in the first person. You have often used the 'objective' form."

"Yes, but then I didn't always feel quite myself. At one time I was fairly successful in the theater. I was marked down as a new Bernard Shaw. But I left the theater. An author has no business appearing on the boards himself. Shaw did, it's true, but for the sake of scenic effect, not self-discovery. The critics had not left off lamenting the departure of Maugham the dramatist when I had already finished with fiction and turned to the writing of memoirs, a form more suitable for my purposes."

"As far as I know, you are publishing only a small part of your memoirs. And you have been destroying letters and everything else that may throw light on your enigmatic personality."

"But I didn't say I wanted to explain myself to others. I was talking about self-knowledge. These are two very different things. Why can't one create for oneself only, as my imaginary Gauguin did? To this day I am delighted to think that Gauguin burned down the hut with all his paintings in it. That was a well-conceived act! What is important is the

creative state, and not the bustle that goes with it. I am always burning some papers, drafts, notes, but I didn't burn anything that was completed, with the exception of one novel which didn't turn out well. I didn't even burn *The Magician*, as I badly needed money then. Unfortunately, most writers need money. Writers are seldom born into families of millionaires. Marcel Proust was one, and who else?.. But of course it's not only a matter of money. Literature is like a letter, and a letter is always addressed to someone. But why can't one write to oneself? Or rather, to the future self, for we are a different person every day. There were people who did just that; manuscripts that were discovered after their authors' death are not such a rare thing. And we don't know how many manuscripts had been burned. The literature that we have is what has not been burned or hidden. There is a lot of it, quite a lot of it, but is there any sense in it? Since all the millions of books cannot prevent war, killings in peacetime, violence, betrayal, all forms of suppression of the human personality, does it mean that there is no need for literature? But who knows what sort of brigandage would reign everywhere if there were no literature? And can one speak of need as a criterion? What is needed, and what is not needed? It means that one is not obliged to burn one's manuscripts, for they reflect something about the days that one has lived, they are a part of life

and belong to it, not to us, like leaves and grass. Still, I will probably destroy a larger part of my memoirs. Not out of principle. My doubts, torments, fears, my confusion belong to me alone. I do not wish to feed my vultures with biscuits. As I leave, I clean up after myself."

"Lev Tolstoy didn't do this."

"Lev Tolstoy!.. That's not a writer, not a man like any other, but an elemental force. He cannot be judged, for he is not subject to any laws. He is a law himself." Maugham fell silent, his lips moving, and then suddenly broke out with childlike delight: "But even he was let down by assertions. Remember Giraudoux said that 'Troy was destroyed by assertions'? Now why didn't I say that? For I have long had that thought, only I haven't put it into words."

I said I didn't quite catch his meaning.

"But it's all very simple!" said Maugham. "Now take the statement with which *Anna Karenina* begins, those wonderful, musical words that remain forever in one's memory: 'All happy families resemble one another; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' But if the first part of the statement is true, then unhappy families should also be alike. No, every happy family is happy in its own way, just as every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. I didn't have time to write a story on this subject. It's actually a true story. Would you like to have it as a present?"

I am unable to retell Maugham's story in his exact words. I shall try as much as possible to preserve his tone, but I'm afraid I will not succeed in this. Too much time has passed, and his voice has faded in my memory. The notes I have taken during my meeting with Maugham are unfortunately too short and hurried.

First Maugham told me about his heroes. He was a bit hazy about the Captain (I write the word with a capital C, for that's how he will be called in the story). Maugham began to describe him somewhat haltingly, as if uncertain of all the facts. Either he didn't know the previous history of the Captain very well, or he had forgotten some part of it but didn't want to invent anything himself. It seems that the Captain, while still a young man, ruined his career when in a fit of bravado he smashed his boat by hitting a pier. After this incident he had to start climbing the career ladder all over again, slowly, step by step. This didn't improve his character, for he was irritable and unsociable.

On one of his voyages his boat broke down and for a long time he hanged about the islands of the Hebrides, having absolutely nothing to do. Nearly driven mad by idleness he did some sketches of the sea with a two-color pencil. He found the occupation relaxing and on his next voyage took along a box of cheap oil paints. He didn't seem to think very highly of his daubings, but when he returned

to the shores he didn't throw them away but took them with him. He had a tiny flat at the port of Southend. An inveterate bachelor, he unhesitatingly broke off every tie that might bind him. He thought he was jealously guarding his freedom, but in fact he was afraid of having any responsibilities.

He was not a lady's man, generally speaking. Whisky meant more to him than women. He liked to drink alone, conversing with the bottle. He really did, and it was always about the same thing: how everyone around him was a scoundrel and what a remarkable, honest and misunderstood man he was.

Everybody was guilty before the Captain, and especially his parents who, undistinguished by either good looks or dignified bearing, had dared bring him into the world. It was thanks to them that he was short, bony, hawk-like. There was not a single attractive or striking feature in him except his smile. It was sudden and menacing, but the Captain did not inherit it, he had cultivated it deliberately. He had noticed that a sudden baring of his white sharp teeth, causing two deep folds to form in his skin that stretched from the sides of his gristly nose to his tight thin-lipped mouth, produced quite an impression on those around him. He seldom smiled, however, but when he did, it turned him into man others had to reckon with.

When he was sober he had a high opinion of his artistic abilities; at times he felt that

he was devilishly talented, but that his rise was hindered by a complete ignorance of his craft. It was rather too late to learn...

What he had started to do out of sheer boredom gradually turned into a necessity and a kind of solace, and after a while the only thing in his life that had any meaning. He did not abandon the sea (if sailing in coastal waters in a decrepit old ship can be regarded as romantic seafaring), for the Captain needed money so he could buy drinks and paints. A man with the soul of Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh, Nelson and Cook, he was compelled to sail along the dirty coasts of England, delivering some uninteresting freights. Instead of frigates, corvettes and brigantines he sailed in "dry cargo ships"—to the Captain there were no more depressing, disheartening words than these. But his dream of sailing in a splendid white ship continued to haunt him, though he had never admitted this to anyone, not even to himself. And if the stirring image should rise up before him he brushed it away.

He only painted what he saw in front of him: the coastal waters strewn with rubbish, piers, launches, barges, dry cargo ships, seagulls on oily iridescent water, sunrises, sunsets, dusk and very seldom people, who always appeared as part of a landscape; the Captain did not paint portraits or still-lives. His pictures were fanciful; he himself did not always recognize the subject in them. His

brush had a way of doing what it liked: everything appeared distorted, warped, wrenched out of shape; it was seen in reverse perspective so that what was in the background looked bigger than what was in the foreground. The world he painted was flamboyant, flashy, rather like the clothes worn by gypsies. All his landscapes were garish, untouched by sunlight: they were oppressive and filled with gloom, not with sadness in which there is something cathartic. The dark soul of the Captain seemed to have been embedded in the crude bright colors, and had poisoned them. Artistically the Captain was uneducated; he never went to museums or exhibitions, and had no idea about different schools of art. But the more paint he splashed on the canvasses, the more fiercely he was convinced that he was right in painting as he did. He would not have it any other way. He hated the paintings he happened to have seen done by others. He liked only his own pictures, and then only when he was sober. When he had too much to drink, he lost all faith in his genius...

The Captain's paintings do not actually deserve such a long description, though as time went by he achieved a measure of success and fame. For a while he was even in fashion.

When he met the Joneses few people had heard of him. The Joneses had, however. There are people who are observant and notice every little trifling thing. The Joneses

were kindly and good-hearted. They saw in the painting of the sailor-artist what had escaped others: loneliness and an unhappy life, and pitied him in their spiritual bounty.

Who were the Joneses? He was a world-renowned archaeologist who had done much work in Africa. He received his doctorate when he was still quite young, and was later elected a member of the Royal Society, president of the archaeological society, and an honorary member of the oldest European academies; he had been awarded several gold medals and had published thick learned volumes. Yet all this seemed to have happened in another world, in a sphere that was totally isolated from mundane society. Jones was not troubled by his social obscurity, for he loved science for its own sake. He was in his elements when he fussed over fragments of pottery and bones that had lain in earth for thousands of years; that was as natural to him as his love for his wife and son and his interest in art. And what was surprising in such a serious-minded and busy man, he played a good game of tennis, for he was strong and agile by nature. The physical training helped him on his long expeditions, and he took great care to keep himself fit.

In addition to all other advantages nature had given him an attractive and striking appearance. He was bald at an early age, but baldness became him: it revealed the perfect shape of his large skull with a powerful pro-

truding forehead, the rounded back of his head and a smooth crown covered with shiny skin of a brown color; his dry black hair, carefully combed back from the temples to the neck, completed the magnificent form of his head. He had broad, slightly sloping shoulders and a thick-set figure.

The unusual appearance of Jones was something of a personal achievement, for his parents and grandparents were typical Anglo-Saxons: pale, tall and thin. And his features were not passed on to his only son whom he loved as much as archaeology. The boy took after his mother: he had a rather pale but healthy complexion, blue eyes under dark eyelashes and reddish golden hair. He had narrow shoulders and appeared weak-chested, a fact which caused Jones some anxieties. But he was a healthy, tough boy who was good at games. He had a tender lingering smile and it always gave Jones a catch at the heart to see it. It was the smile of someone dear and defenseless, the smile of the boy's mother whom the hopelessly constant Jones was destined to love to the end of his days.

This tender-hearted and beautiful woman lived in an atmosphere of unceasing adoration. Both men in the family behaved as if she were a piece of fragile porcelain whom one must always guard and protect. They anticipated all her wishes, surrounded her with earnest solicitude like an invisible veil. But Mary Jones would have preferred less gallantry and

deference, less guardianship, and more family camaraderie, something simpler, more informal. When her husband or son fell ill she almost rejoiced: at least for a while the knights would leave off their suits of armor, and she could nurse them and be useful to her dear ones.

Otherwise her kindliness found little application. And kindliness was the only gift of this good-hearted and unassuming woman. She came from the middle classes and had liked being a teacher at a primary school where she had ample opportunities to exercise her patience and show pity and concern for the young and the weak. It was quite by chance that she met Jones who fell in love with her at first sight and proposed. She found him likeable, and without having the least idea of his character, profession and way of life, she accepted him. Having suddenly risen on the social ladder she was at first puzzled and confused, but gradually got used to her new life: to be the wife of a promising scientist, the mistress of a big house was much more pleasant than being a poor schoolteacher. Her first flush of fascination with the unusual, almost mysterious man with the reddish brown skin of an Indian turned into an untroubled and devoted love.

Mary had beautiful deep-blue eyes, but even more remarkable in her lovely face was her shapely, fresh-colored mouth. It was often twisted into an involuntary grimace of

pity and compassion. For her kind heart was always hearing distress signals which were unheard by others: the world was teetering on the edge of disaster, everything in it—from man to trees and birds—was calling for help. Jones realized that this compassion was breaking the heart of one so dear to him, and was in agonies because he could not persuade her to stop tormenting herself. All his attempts to explain this to her came to nothing. Mary was incapable of thinking in abstract terms. She would listen to his clever, intricate arguments, nodding her golden head, but her lips continued to quiver as if she were in pain. Jones would not let her shower pity on him, but what was he to do with the dark signals she was receiving that told of the sufferings in the world? The poor unattended children of a primary school called for pity and concern. But now she was surrounded by people who were well cared-for. Jones wisely decided that the situation could be saved only with the help of money. He had Mary subscribe to various charities, and allotted a considerable part of the family budget for helping the needy. It was not at all what her heart yearned for, but at least it gave her some relief.

Jones was a kindly man himself, but within reason. So good-heartedness for him was not a source of misery. But it was for her, and if Mrs. Jones didn't have to perform her domestic rituals, which were almost like religious rites,

if she were not held in check by the chains of an orderly life and her numerous duties, she would have fallen into the abyss of other people's sufferings and sorrows, which gaped at her very feet. Her packed days—keeping an open house, looking after her husband and her son, receiving guests in the evening, going to theaters, museums, exhibitions, concerts, attending meetings of charitable committees with the inevitable tea and biscuits—were an antidote to the good-heartedness that was wearing her down.

...Jones began to go on long expeditions which took him far away from home. So long as Mary had her son with her she did not feel bereft. She loved her son and unobtrusively and with great delicacy took an interest in all he did as a child and then as a young man. But when he entered college and went to live in Oxford, her days became empty and unbearable. She rushed into the forefront of charity—the slums. It whiled away the time, but she had an uneasy feeling that there was something false in what she was doing. She always felt a little ashamed, and most of all she suspected that her good works went past the really needy.

Her mind was partly occupied by fears for her son and husband, and she had some anxious moments as she awaited their return home. But when they came she was not really happy. Their independence, self-assurance, their chivalrous and protective attitude

towards her, a weak woman, deprived her of her main joy in life, which was to feel pity for her dear ones.

And into the life of these three loving people, which had become clouded owing to no one's fault, the well-ordered life of an affectionate family, walked the Captain with all his dubious charm.

Actually there was not a trace of charm in the Captain: spiteful, irritable, disgruntled, ill-mannered, nearly always drunk, he was a man who had no feeling or respect for anybody or anything. But to Mary he had one great merit before which all the faults of his character fell away. If the world sang to her an endless song of suffering, from the Captain rolled waves of a soundless wolfish howl of pain, anger and loneliness...

The Joneses met him at an exhibition. Jones took a fancy to the Captain's landscapes and explained to Mary why they were good. Mary understood when she sensed the loneliness that was crying out from the paintings.

The Captain, who was at the exhibition, was introduced to the Joneses. His crumpled pea-jacket, blood-shot eyes, his foul breath in which the smell of whisky was mixed with that of strong tobacco (the Captain smoked in the exhibition hall, puffing smoke into his sleeve with frayed cuff) struck the Joneses, but not in the same way. A vigorous, well-groomed and sensible man, Jones shuddered, but immediately reproached himself

for being pettily overfastidious. Mrs. Jones pitied the Captain with all her generous heart. She saw a connection between the artist and his paintings despite the incongruity between the garish colors of his pictures and his shabby appearance. To her that was a token of truthfulness.

Troubled by a secret sense of guilt before the Captain, Jones invited him to supper at a restaurant. The Captain shrugged his shoulders, as a sign of consent. The Joneses asked the owner of the exhibition hall, Smith, an old acquaintance, to join them. At supper the Captain said not a word, ate nothing, and only drank.

"Why do you drink so much?" asked Mrs. Jones, leaning towards him and gently touching his dirty sleeve with her hand.

"What has that got to do with you?" said the Captain in a loud voice.

He glanced at the long, pink, translucent fingers that were slowly working down his sleeve, and added:

"So I would go mad sooner."

The conversation flagged. The Captain puffed away at his pipe, screened by a cloud of ill-smelling smoke. The usually talkative Smith, alarmed by his sullenness, hardly spoke a word and looked askance at the Captain. Only Jones seemed determined to keep up a conversation, taking his defeat with fortitude.

"Will you let us come to your studio?" Jones asked.

"I haven't got a studio," the Captain replied with an ugly grin.

"Do you sell your pictures?"

"I do, but nobody buys them."

"Why," Smith remonstrated, "the museum has an option on two of your paintings..."

"Cut it out!" the Captain growled. "No one is interested in that."

"If the landscape with the overturned boat is not sold, I would like to buy it," said Jones.

"Are you an art patron?" the Captain asked sarcastically.

He drank some whisky and was suddenly seized with a fit of coughing.

Almost instinctively Mrs. Jones leaped to her feet and started to beat the Captain on the back. Good gracious, she thought to herself, nothing but bones, the poor back!

The Captain held the napkin to his mouth, spat into it and caught his breath.

"Thank you," he said, grinning at Mrs. Jones, whose cheeks were flushed from her exertion. "For such a fine lady you have a strong fist."

"I am not at all a fine lady," said Mrs. Jones. "Where did you get that idea?"

The Captain burst out laughing and for some reason seemed to have got into a good mood.

"Would you like to have that painting as a present?" he asked.

"No," said Jones quietly. "Please name a price, if you will be so kind, and allow us to take it after the exhibition closes."

"Ask him," said the Captain, jerking his head

at Smith. "I don't know anything about it."

Jones raised his glass and proposed to the Captain's health.

"Cheers," the Captain responded.

The evening ended better than could be expected.

Smith asked the Captain why he never painted the big water.

"What do you mean by 'the big water'?"

"The sea, the open sea. You always paint it with a view of the shore. You are a seascape painter who paints the shore."

"You cannot paint the sea," said the Captain in a quiet voice, without a trace of his usual aggressiveness. "Turner couldn't do it, and all the rest failed. No one can ever paint the sea. Do you islanders know what the sea is?" He launched into a violent, disjointed speech from which Mrs. Jones could not remember a single word, but she believed forever after that she had discovered that terrifying mystery: the sea. Oh, it was wonderful—what he said and how he said it. The Captain grew silent, gave a hideous smile and poured into his glass the remaining drops of whisky, which he drank neat. He drank it up slowly and then said in a dull voice:

"The seventh degree of concentration. Enough of this! It's time to turn in."

"It's wonderful the way he spoke," said Mrs. Jones to her husband dreamily when they got home.

"Yes," Jones agreed, "though I felt only

the force of passion. The substance escaped me."

"Still, he is an extraordinary man..."

"I don't know what kind of a man he is, but he is an interesting painter. It is strange," added Jones thoughtfully, "how often the price of talent is a deplorable character, alcoholism or madness. Is that what talent essentially is?"

"That is easy for you to say," thought Mrs. Jones, and for the first time in her married life she felt vague stirrings of hostility towards her husband. "You have always lived on the sunny side of life." Aloud, she said:

"What an unhappy man he is..."

Jones glanced at her and suppressed a sigh.

The Captain remained in London for some time and continued to see the Joneses. Jones bought the landscape that he liked with the overturned boat and hung it himself in the drawing-room between a print by Hogarth and a sketch by Derain. When the Captain saw it he did not say if he liked the arrangement. This meeting, which took place at the home of the Joneses, passed in much the same way as in the restaurant: the Captain drank a great deal, did not touch any food, and smoked one pipe after another, dropping ashes on the table. From time to time he gave a cruel smile as if to warn his hosts to be careful with him. But with the Joneses that was quite unnecessary. The Captain did not say anything to shock them, nor did he fall into that confused,

sincere manner with which he spoke about the sea. Just because he was not insolent the Captain seemed—to Mary of course, but not to her husband—even more unhappy, lonely, neglected and in need of sympathy and care (he suffered from a chronic ulcer), and support, praise and adoration: the Captain did not have to lift a finger to destroy the happiness of the Joneses. He was such a model of an unhappy man that a feeling of love began to crystallize in Mrs. Jones's heart with astonishing speed. The Captain was sufficiently penetrating and cynical—in this he was unlike Jones—to realize what an unlooked-for gift fate, usually merciless, had in store for him. But he was too vain to acknowledge the real source of his good fortune. Such notions as slovenliness, bad manners, ill breeding, shabbiness did not exist for him; he believed he was a fine fellow, at any rate, much more interesting and attractive than Jones, a sluggard and block-head, with his smooth, polite manners.

Over the years the Captain had come to have a different opinion of his appearance, and thought no more of the mistakes of his parents. Screen stars had ceased to be the idols; it was the man of character that had come into his own. Even if you were not an Apollo or Antinous, you were a man blown by the wind and touched by seaspray, draped in the romance of vast expanses, a rough, forthright seafarer, a tramp who despised the

social bustle which sapped one's strength, a personality and on top of it a great and unusual talent.

Having possessed Mary, the Captain exercised the right of the strong. He was not discomfited by the fact that Jones had a much more demanding job working under a scorching sun in the desert, often without food and water, than he who sailed in dry cargo ships, that Jones was an acknowledged authority in the world of science, while he was a dilettante artist of whom people said "there is something in him", that Jones could crush him like an insect if he wished, and that, lastly, he had not performed any real masculine feat and could lay no claim to victory over Jones since it was all Mary's doing, not his.

In his more sober moments the Captain would not admit to himself that he was getting his own back on Jones because Jones was a better man than he, materially and morally, one whose cuffs were spotless, who owned a beautiful house, a Devonshire castle, who had a son he was proud of, who had wealth and good manners, and an absurd credulousness that sprang from a faith in the excellence of everything he possessed. But when the Captain was drunk he frankly gloated over the blow he had dealt Jones, from which Jones could never recover, a blow in the pit of the stomach, so to speak. But we are running ahead of our story.

It all began like this. Mary could hardly

wait till Jones left home. While he was getting ready for his expedition, carefully checking every item of equipment, every tin of food and juice, the brick of dried beef, the packet of vitamins and medicines, Mary, indifferent to his preparations, could only think of the Captain. He was probably lying in an unmade bed in some rundown hotel, drinking cheap whisky, which was bad for ulcer sufferers, and dropping ashes everywhere. As soon as Jones left, she tracked down the Captain with surprising skill, without arousing the least suspicion in anyone.

The Captain was indeed lying in a bed with crumpled bedclothes in a cheap hotel, and he was smoking, his pillow covered with ashes. But he was sober and therefore in an irritable state.

"You should have warned me that you were coming. I might not have been alone."

"Please forgive me," Mrs. Jones whispered. "I was so worried about you."

Mary was surprised that the Captain behaved as if he expected she would come. She did not know that callous, unfeeling people often had good self-control.

"Is she a fool or a trollop?" the Captain wondered. "Or perhaps both?"

He decided to find out immediately. Frightened and nervous, Mrs. Jones awkwardly and hurriedly helped him. Did she know when she came that in saving the soul of this sufferer she would have to save his body too?

Most likely not. She simply submitted to circumstances. Mary was not a passionate woman and had never deceived her husband. But paradoxically, this made it easy for her to take such a step, which would make women more experienced in love hesitate. She did not know that she would have to sin, if only in that small and unpleasant way, in order to earn the right to do good. There was never any thought of sin or wrongdoing in her relations with Jones, which were tender, pure and untroubled, which merely made her feel quietly proud that he was happy with her.

Now she knew everything could be different...

The death sentence was passed on Jones. But Mary was not particularly worried about her husband, and thought little of the life she had led till now which was blotted out at one stroke. She did not even think much about her son, though things were going to be different with him, too...

Returning home after her visit to the Captain, Mary experienced a new, unfamiliar feeling: she was now somebody. She was a woman who had decided to give up her brilliant and loving husband, her only child, her position in society, everything to which she was accustomed, for the sake of love (her pity for the Captain was already raised to the rank of love). But in her excited state she did not forget the simple everyday cares. She realized with a shock that the Captain did

not have any underclothes. It seemed that her heart would break: "Oh, you poor dear!" Now she knew what she must do: she would begin with the small items...

It was a game which the Captain could not lose. He could behave even worse, but that only would make Mary more tender towards him. The worse, the better—that was how Mary justified her actions. But in fact she had no need for justification, for she was certain that what she did was right. Her heart seemed to swell till it filled her whole body. She had never known such happiness, the happiness of fulfillment.

Mary rang the Captain and received his permission to visit him. She arrived with a parcel of clothes and various toilet articles. The Captain flew into a rage and nearly beat her up.

"Don't you try to bind yourself to me!" he thundered. "Do you think I'm like your super-hygienic husband? I hate these rags!"

The whole episode ended as such senseless mutinies usually end. The Captain allowed himself to be put under a shower and, to his great mortification, washed from head to toe. Then he was given underclothes, a pair of light flannel trousers and a woolen shirt with big breast pockets for pipes and tobacco. He again got into a rage, but now for a different reason. She had brought huge expenditures on him, but he wasn't a rich man who could throw his money on foppish clothes.

"But it's a present," Mary murmured.

The Captain in his elegant trousers and smart shirt, his small head wet from the shower, raised the roof. Who did she think he was? A lady's man, a gigolo, a pimp? He rushed to an old chest of drawers and rummaged about till he found the money and flung it at Mary.

"That's too much..." she protested.

"The rest we will spend on drink," the Captain said calmly.

He got angry because he was afraid he wouldn't be able to pay for the clothes Mary brought him. When it came to money the Captain was scrupulous. He was often hard up, but he never allowed Mary to spend money on him, not even for beer. Only once did he accept a present from her—a cheap meerschaum pipe.

In the beginning, when he hated and despised Jones, who so easily allowed himself to be robbed, the Captain liked to joke: let Jones, the silly fathead, pay for everything. But as Mary showed no sign of looking after her husband's purse, he dropped the joke. He began to cut down on whisky and work at his paintings so as to make ends meet in his new semi-married state. His pictures began to bring him a small income.

Seeing him sober day after day, with his fingers covered with paint, Mary was unspeakably happy, convinced that she had a good influence on him. She could think as she

liked, of course, but the Captain was spurred on not by any moral principles, but by his idea of "manliness" which formerly drove him to debauchery and now condemned him to leading an upright life—if one disregarded such a trifle as living with another man's wife.

But sometimes the Captain felt the need to let off steam. He would disappear for a few days and return without a penny in his pocket, his eyes red like a rabbit's, his hands shaking, with half of his face covered with bruises and even knife wounds. Such escapades were not subject to discussion. Mary was allowed to wash and bandage him and stuff him with all sorts of pills. When he had recovered from his debauch he would punish both of them for his dissipation: they did not stir out of his room and drank tea only. Mary would have loved to go to some bar with him and dance to the accompaniment of loud jazz music or ride on a swing in an amusement park, and then slowly sip dark foamy beer at a table by the lake in which were reflected the lights of Chinese lanterns. It seemed to her that because of him she had come to like such simple pleasures, but here she was mistaken. The Captain could not stand all that, except beer, while she herself had liked those things since she was a girl. In the prim world of Jones Mary did not have her own life. Being of a malleable nature she adapted to that world, but was never part of it. She felt really free when she was near the Captain.

He often hurt her by having groundless suspicions against her or by not speaking to her for some imaginary offense. Seldom a day passed without her being reduced to tears. But Mary forgave him everything. She had particularly much to bear when the Captain could not get her portrait right and berated her for being talentless and not knowing how to pose.

Going to museums and exhibitions with her husband, Mary had grown accustomed to the most outlandish manner of painting. She understood that in painting everything was permitted: instead of eyes one might see blue buttons, or the eyes might be placed one above another, the face could be painted a green or purple color or even a dirty yellow tinged with black, which reminded one of cow's dung, or there might be a piling up of cubes and cones and crisscrossing of planes or simply muddy spots. At times out of a strange portrait something magically human emerged, but often there was nothing at all, only some kind of puzzle or riddle. She did not like puzzles and could not solve them, but Jones liked them and often clicked his tongue in front of some charade that had been put in a frame, and then Mary would think that there was indeed something hidden in the picture.

But there was nothing here: no artistic tricks, no reversed angle, no puzzle, no violent distortion; the poor Captain was entirely serious when he painted the portrait of "his

woman". He really put himself out and tried to create a realistic portrait. Mary was deeply touched by his attempt to surpass himself for the sake of his beloved—she had a lump in her throat when she looked at the picture of the joyless, lifeless creature that bore a certain resemblance to her. But her feelings did not console the Captain in his disappointment. He was not at fault, God knows he tried, but any genius would be stumped by a lifeless mask, a hopelessly insipid, common, uninspiring face. Mary agreed: if something was lacking in the portrait, it was entirely her fault. Indeed she did not know how to pose, and her head was filled with all kinds of nonsense, but nature should rise to the height of art. "Where did you get that?" asked the Captain suspiciously. Mary muttered that she had read it somewhere. At last the Captain's rage subsided, he stopped hurling his brushes about and kicking his easel, and spent the rest of the day nursing a bottle of corn whiskey which he drank straight from the bottle. Mary dared not make even a weak protest; she understood that this highly sensitive man had sustained a defeat which threatened—he hinted as much by the heavy look on his face—to turn into a long artistic crisis. Mary knew what that foreboded.

Still, that was life—rough, harsh, bitter, enchanting. It was different from skipping from one perch to another in a golden cage.

She felt sick all over when the Captain told

her that he was putting out to sea. She went into a fit of weeping, while he, surprised by such an outburst of grief, was touched and at the same time embarrassed, and so got angry and shouted at Mary:

"Stop this howling! Have you forgotten that your dung beetle of a husband is coming back?"

"Yes, I have," Mary admitted humbly.

"Oh, you muddle-head!" the Captain grinned derisively. He did not know how to say anything in an even tone: he snarled, stormed, roared, swore, all of which helped him sustain a feeling of superiority.

But now he no longer wished to feel superior. For the first time he believed that his intimacy with Mary was not due to the whim of a woman who had everything and was bored and wanted a change, or to his bewitching charm which would fade away the moment the real husband appeared, but to something different, which he had never experienced before, which people called love.

He did not know what to do with this unsought-for gift. It occurred to him that Mary might want to entangle him, to bind him hand and foot, take his manly freedom away from him, and then his embarrassment turned to panic. But almost immediately he realized that his freedom was guaranteed by Jones the father, Jones the son and the whole family chain, and he was relieved. It only remained for him to feel grateful to Mary and proud of

himself. That was what it meant to be strong and tough: how easily had he, a drifter without kith and kin, a sea tramp, a poor artist, toppled the castle that had been built by many generations of the Joneses!

Mary had no inkling of the Captain's thoughts. For the first time she believed that he, too, needed her, but then why did he not tell her to live with him? She was willing to accompany him to Southend with just what she had on, without stopping at her home to get her things, and wait patiently till he returned, as all seamen's wives did. But from his dry, weather-beaten lips the longed-for word never came. How could he, with his quick, uncontrollable temper, bear the idea of her returning to Jones? It would be better if he killed her. But the Captain set about packing his few things in silence and did not even snap at her when she begged him to take care of himself and his talent, not to drink and at least once in a while to remember his poor Mary. She made no mention of correspondence as the Captain had already told her that he hated to write letters.

She cried all the way home, wept during the night, and woke up with tears in her eyes as she thought of the Captain who should have gone out to sea, and then she remembered that her husband was coming home that evening.

It aroused no particular feeling in her. She was neither happy nor unhappy. It was only

natural that Jones should return to his own house. She must prepare for his homecoming, order his favorite dishes for supper. Jones, who lived on dried beef and tinned food and biscuits when he went on expeditions, was a gourmet when he got home, and was always served excellent meals. The routine of domestic work unexpectedly brought Mary a feeling of satisfaction. At least it helped to fill the emptiness inside her. She bought flowers; Jones had always admired the way she arranged them, and indeed she did it with taste, though it was hard to say where she got it from. Then she remembered that her son was coming home for his holiday. Lately she had forbidden herself to think of him, and succeeded. But now she would be glad to see him again.

Jones did not like to be met. He took a taxi from the railway station; he looked as if he had come from Buckingham Palace instead of returning from an exhausting expedition. Mary was surprised that everything went as usual as if there had never been those crazy months which she spent with the Captain, as if she hadn't changed.

The habits formed over the years directed her actions, gestures, words and intonations so that she did not have to resort to will. Her relations with her husband were bridled, if not controlled, by form: they did not throw themselves into each other's arms, she did not hang on his neck or shed tears of joy after the

long separation; no improper words were spoken, no endearments such as people use when they hug one another while standing over a suitcase, talking all at once and inexplicably bursting into happy laughter. Jones ceremoniously took her hand, then carefully kissed her on the forehead, and holding her somewhat away from him looked into her eyes and then pressed his cheek to hers. For some reason she was assigned an entirely passive role. He smiled, and then headed for the bathroom.

When he emerged refreshed, the table was laid, with chilled champagne in a bucket filled with ice. They sat down to dinner, a bottle was uncorked...

He said little, of course, about his expedition, but as always he had some amusing incidents to tell, which made Mary laugh.

Everything went according to the established order. Jones asked her what she had been doing with herself while he was away. It was a traditional question, and he always asked it in an offhand way, with a smile, indicating that he did not expect a detailed answer. Formerly, when she had nothing to hide, she attributed his manner to that great delicacy that marked everything he did or said: he did not want her to feel that she had to give an account of herself. But now it seemed to her that there was something deliberate and artificial in that carefree tone of his. It was absurd to think that rumors had

reached him in the desert. Nevertheless, she could not get off with the usual "Good gracious, what could I have been doing with myself? There were meetings, tea and biscuits and my poor dear ones..."

What should she do? Make a clean breast of it at once? That would be cruel. He had just returned from a long expedition, and despite his impeccable form he must be deadly tired, and not everything might have turned out well, there might be disappointments which were part of his profession. He would need sleep and a good rest; you did not hit a man when he was down. Besides, the Captain had not said that she should tell her husband everything. Most likely he would not want that. She had no right to take such a decisive step without his approval. And she herself was disinclined to do anything. In the comfortable routine in which she now found herself a confession would be quite out of place. She was not afraid to tell the truth, but neither her husband nor the Captain had need of it, for the time being. Did she need it? She didn't know.

Surprised and slightly startled by his wife's silence, Jones asked about their son. The boy almost never wrote, she complained. She only knew that he was in good health and spent a good deal of time rowing.

"And more is not required of him," said Jones with a wry smile. "He is of that age now when he needs to free himself from our

authority and tutelage. We must help him in this. We must not badger him with all sorts of questions and advice, for he will resent it, but at the same time we should keep an eye on him. Now it is not he, but we who must pass the test of maturity."

"And how long will this last?" Mary asked, thinking that before they passed the test there must be no change in their life.

"Two, three years," Jones said.

Since her childhood Mary had loved the story of the brave tin soldier. That night she showed great courage, sharing the bed of her husband.

For nearly a week Jones made up for lost sleep, waking only to take her into his arms. She patiently submitted to his embraces. It had always been like this, and people were creatures of habit.

The son arrived. And then a new page in Mary's life began: the son left for the university, Jones again went on an expedition, and shortly before that the Captain returned.

At first Mary thought she would break under the strain of leading a double life, go clear out of her mind, or even commit suicide. But ten years went by, and things remained just as they were. Well, not quite. There were difficult, heart-rending, terrible moments; the secret became known, and what was pain for the Joneses became an inexhaustible source of gossip for others. The gossip eventually died down, but essentially nothing changed: Mary

was still the wife of Jones, the mistress of the Captain, and the wicked mother of a grown-up son whose attitude towards her went through all stages: anger, shame, pain, contempt, disgust, half-forgiveness and benevolent indifference.

...In vain Mary waited for the Captain to give the sign.

But what could he offer her besides his shabby person, dreadful character and cheap rooms in dilapidated hotels? Despite his high opinion of himself he thought this would be poor compensation for the loss of that life with which Jones had provided her. He did not believe in disinterestedness; it never occurred to him that Mary would sacrifice everything the moment he said the word. For Mary, the last bond that tied her to her home was cut when her son stopped answering her letters—no doubt he knew before his father did.

Mary was surprised that the Captain did not mind her belonging to two men. She herself found it irksome, though not too much. In her relations to Jones she merely submitted. She did not know that lovers are usually not jealous of the husbands. The Captain, meanwhile, continued to take satisfaction in the fact that he had put a pair of horns on the head of that rich imbecile, the descendant of puffed-up nitwits.

Mary's only hope was that Jones would know everything and turn her out of the

house, for then the Captain would have to take her in. Jones's ignorance dumbfounded her. For she and the Captain did not try to hide anything. They went together to bars, cheap restaurants, cafes, boxing-matches (the Captain was fond of boxing and as a young man had had some success as a featherweight), and to exhibitions and museums. To be sure, people of Jones's circle shunned the kind of popular entertainments that attracted Mary and the Captain. And it seemed only natural that she should be seen on opening days of exhibitions and in museums with an artist whose pictures were bought by her husband. Still, her son knew, her maid knew, and Mary could hardly believe that Jones was ignorant. But that was just like him: to know and say nothing.

Jones's ominous silence, the lie that was in her every word, gesture and smile, in the taste of food and wine, in the scent of flowers, and the icy disdain of her son finally broke Mary, and without further thought she told Jones everything.

After making her confession Mary still wondered whether it came as a shock to Jones or whether it merely confirmed a suspicion that had been tormenting him. He looked so embarrassed, surprised, and helpless that Mary thought he was putting on an act. But then he would have to be a first-rate actor, which he was not. And what puzzled her most of all was that he said not a word, as

if awaiting for her to continue. That set her thinking. Of course she had not spoken the words that were uppermost in her mind: "I am leaving you." But she could not say them because she had no place to go. If he had a speck of pride and self-respect he would cast her out. That would be an act of mercy, then everything would take its course—or maybe not. But that would be no concern of his. What was required of him was that he should make a gesture, the only gesture a man in his position could make. Jones remained silent. He had regained his composure; he looked benign and serious, perhaps just a little stupefied.

"Well, say something," Mary said.

When he spoke his voice seemed to come from afar:

"You see how cruel white people are. Their lips are thin, their noses pointed, and there are folds and wrinkles on their faces, and in their eyes there is a sharp searching look. White people are always after something, they are always looking for something. They are restless and impatient. They are never satisfied with what they have, but must always have what is not theirs. I am an Indian, and you prefer a white man."

"Are you quoting somebody?" Mary asked uncertainly. For a moment she thought he had gone mad.

"Carl Jung. Approximately, of course. It was from a description of his travels."

"And at a moment like this you have no words of your own. That's probably why it all had to happen."

"What is important is what lies behind the words," said Jones.

Having told him the truth, Mary felt faint. So his learned hints and allusions were quite lost on her. People were generally too complicated for Mary, who was artless. They were always full of maxims, quotations, paradoxes, other people's opinions, horrid passions, clever vices and obscure virtues, and they were so sure of their own righteousness. Jones was no doubt the best man in the world, but even he was a puzzle. Why did he make pretty speeches instead of coming straight out with his decision? She would agree to everything. Only one thing frightened her: what should she do about her son? She realized she no longer had any claims on him—that was not Jones's doing—the boy himself had rejected her. There was nothing she could do now, she should have thought of it before. If only everything would end quickly. But Jones seemed to be in no hurry to draw the line; he only suffered in silence. Something inside Mary gave way: she forgot her own wishes and began to feel deeply sorry for Jones. His stylish tweed jacket and his old-fashioned notion of generosity, his well-pressed trousers, the starched cuffs of his shirt, his soft moccasins, his irreproachableness, which did not shield him from anything, and his joy, now

dashed to the ground, of coming back to his home, his spiritual fortress, filled her with pity.

From the ruins that surrounded them there remained only the force of habit formed over many years. When it was time to retire it occurred to neither of them to do the natural thing, which was to abandon their marital couch—an enormous antique bed; they lay down as usual, he on his side of the bed and she on hers. The feeling of pity which never left Mary, not even in her sleep, drew her to her husband, and he mechanically embraced her, as he had always done. Both succumbed to inertia. The next morning Mary reflected that she had slipped all the way to the bottom, farther she could not fall, she was thoroughly rotten. But she felt neither pain nor remorse. Everything seemed to have happened according to some rule that was independent of human will.

Mary thought no more of the matter. Soon she was engaged in a new round of duties. There was to be the traditional reception to celebrate Jones's safe return from his expedition. It was an occasion that had always cost Mary much agitation and anxiety.

The reception was a great success. Mary learned that her friends were rather offended by her: she simply disappeared, did not answer the phone or respond to their invitations; that was unkind of her, could charity work have taken up all her time? It was

necessary to repair the damage at once. Since the Captain was at sea she could devote herself totally to restoring ties with her friends and resume her social obligations. Being kept busy, Mary was spared the torments of inner disquiet and prevented from distressing herself to no avail. At times she forgot she had made her confession. Jones conducted himself as if he knew nothing; not a single false gesture, not a single false note betrayed him. His reserve, tact and kindness filled her with admiration. Jones was a wonder!

It seemed that this was also understood by the Court, though for different reasons: Jones was given the title of baronet. He was presented to the King, together with Mary, of course, and she could not but feel flattered by such royal attentions. Mary was only sorry that she could not tell this to the Captain who despised titles, and all such survivals of feudalism.

And then a great joy befell her: Mary received a short and almost affectionate letter from her son saying that he was sorry he could not come home for his holiday as he had joined an expedition to the north of Scotland. It was clear that he could not yet love her, but she had a son once again. She knew to whom she owed her great happiness. How did Jones manage—and at a distance, too—to overcome the pride of the offended youth and nudge him towards his mother?

Her admiration for her husband grew, though not at the expense of her feelings for the Captain, who was suddenly back in London.

Actually there was nothing sudden in the Captain's appearance. He returned to London at the set time, only she had confused the dates in her happy excitement.

Mary came to hear of it from a friend whom she ran into in an antique shop—Mary was looking for a present for Jones, the newly made baronet. Her friend mentioned the Captain as if by chance, but it was obvious from her smirk and affected manner that everyone knew. The thought flashed across her mind: how would Jones take it? But the thought quickly faded out. Mary bought an eighteenth-century blotting-pad for Jones, and for the Captain, whom she had also somewhat wronged, she chose an inexpensive meerschaum pipe curved like a saxophone, the kind that was long out of fashion: it was just the thing for the lone pirate.

She thought the pipe amusing and could hardly wait to present it to the Captain. But between her and her lover now loomed the large irreproachable figure in a tweed jacket, flannel trousers and soft moccasins, a figure it would be hard to move aside or avoid. How could she ever forget the man who restored her son to her? The reddish face, the grey-blue eyes and the strong sunburned hands gave her security in the world which only pretended to be kind. She was trying to be a

guardian angel to the Captain, while all along Jones had been her guardian angel. The Captain, with his perturbed state of mind, could not spare a thought for her. Mary began to feel miserable.

Help came, as always, from Jones. In the evening he said in his usual soft voice:

"I heard that the Captain is in London. Would you like to see him?"

She would go out of her way to do good, but what Jones said was beyond the limits of ordinary humanity; it was either some kind of martyrdom or cold-bloodedness.

"And are you not jealous?" Her naive wonder softened somewhat the callousness of her question.

"So you want me to be that, too?" Jones gave a forced smile. "Any kind of jealousy is basically a sign of lack of love."

Mary thought it sounded like a maxim; perhaps he was quoting somebody again. He could not even speak of what lay closest to his heart without using somebody else's words. That was his upbringing, he was trained to hide his weakness behind a shield of cut and dry recipes.

"How can I respect you without respecting your feelings?" Jones continued. "I am not a medieval knight and therefore do not believe in chastity belts. It is not my wish that you should humiliate yourself by resorting to lies."

He was putting his cards on the table, and it suddenly seemed to Mary that Jones was

not exactly playing a fair game. She had a feeling of being quietly pushed towards something. But what? She was not going to compete with Jones in magnanimity and give up the Captain. But Jones could hardly be as naive as he appeared to be. Surely he must know that a barrier now stood between her and her love. And a meeting with the Captain so generously proposed by Jones would tie her instead of freeing her. But why should he go to all that trouble? If one day she should find life unbearable, she would simply break away and run to the Captain, and Jones could work out at leisure some clever arguments to justify her act. Obviously Jones wanted to keep her, but did he not realize that he could keep her only so long as the Captain did not bark in his thick rasping voice, "Come!"

"I have nothing against the Captain," Jones said. "I am not concerned with his affairs. And it is not he, but you that I should hate, but I love you. So let us not turn our life into a farce. As I said, I do not want you to learn to lie, deceive, dissemble, always have hidden thoughts and a secret resentment against me. Be free and keep your dignity. You are not to blame for what happened, and you have told me the truth. For that I thank you. Tell him that he need not avoid me. But God help him if he should teach you to drink, for then I would thrash the life out of him. Towards the end of summer the family will be together, I will have our boy come and spend a few

days with us, and then I shall again go on an expedition."

It was all kindly said, and with a sense of honour and justice. And yet it left a bitter taste in the mouth. It was hard to explain why. Jones was laying down the conditions; they should be able to look one another in the face; there was nothing objectionable in that. He was doing everything so that she should not have to lower her head in front of him. Then why was she vexed? Did she chafe at his tone, which was the tone of the master? So he was still at the helm, though one would have thought that he was the one who was left stranded on the shore. She would be powerless till the Captain gave the command.

The meeting with the Captain after the long separation turned out well; it was cordial, though not at once. First the Captain spluttered out his contempt for titles, the aristocracy and the royal family. Then he scolded Mary for making him wait so long for her. But he got raving mad when Mary told him, as she saw no reason to conceal it, that Jones himself had suggested her coming to see him. He wasn't going to do Jones's bidding. If she was so dependent on her husband, they had better stop seeing each other. She must never again tell him anything about her relations with Jones; she had made a fool of Jones, and yet she lied to him out of cowardice.

"But I didn't lie, I told him everything," Mary said.

"Everything?"

"Yes," Mary nearly whispered from fear, "about us."

The Captain was hugely tickled.

"So you gave him a slap in the face, eh? Good for you! That's right, let him feel how his horns are growing. I like an open game. I'm not afraid of him. Just let him try sticking his nose into my affairs. So you told him, eh, just like that? And how did he like it?"

"It was very unpleasant for him," Mary murmured.

"I should think so!" the Captain roared with laughter. "The thing's done, one way or another. And a good thing, too, no beating about the bush."

But Mary continued to have serious misgivings. For the Captain still had not said the word she longed to hear.

The Captain was unusually amiable. He gave an account of his voyage and tried to make it sound funny, which was rare for him, for he was always mocking at others. And he showed Mary his new paintings which Mary liked very much. They were not different from his other pictures, only less tense. Mary and the Captain went to a restaurant, had a few drinks, then returned to the Captain's room.

Mary wanted to stay for the night, but the Captain wouldn't hear of it. He could not bear the thought of having someone sleep in the same bed with him. Mary had learned not to be offended by the Captain's ways. And

after the wearisome hints and intimations of Jones, Mary rather liked the Captain's rough straightforwardness. The Captain saw her to a taxi.

On the whole it had been a happy day. The Captain accepted the pipe without the usual outburst. He filled it with his foul-smelling tobacco and started to smoke, making grimaces in imitation of a ferocious pirate. He did it amusingly, artistically. What hidden talents he had, thought Mary, of which he himself was not aware. If only she could help him bring out at least a small part of his great gifts.

And so life went on. "Everything is in a state of flux, but nothing changes"—these words by Anatole France described perfectly the situation of the *ménage à trois*. All three had had enough time to sort out their own feelings and their relationship to one another and come to a decision. For none of them was satisfied with the situation as it stood, not even the Captain with his devil-may-care attitude, who didn't have "his woman" all to himself. But none had the courage to take the first step. Jones did not try to change anything for fear of losing Mary; Mary was waiting for a sign from the Captain and dared not take matters into her own hands; and the Captain was afraid that at the last minute Mary would hang back, and yet was loathe to take on responsibility.

But within this stable arrangement there

were changes. The Captain began visiting the Joneses, at the wish of the head of the family, of course. In England any divergence from conventions, if sanctified by time, is regarded as irrevocable. Mary's liaison with the Captain came to be sanctioned by society and was no longer discussed, let alone condemned. Jones sensed this change of opinion and decided to receive the Captain in his home.

When she conveyed the invitation to supper to the Captain, Mary fully expected that he would heap abuses on Jones, and on her too, using the dreadful language of seamen. But he quietly, and even a little primly, accepted the invitation. It did not occur to her that it was a challenge he could not very well turn down if he were to preserve his sense of honor.

Mary feared that the Captain would come deliberately dressed in a slipshod way, with greasy hair and with his ill-smelling pipe between his teeth, and Jones would look as if nothing was amiss while secretly despising him for his slovenliness. Actually the Captain had abandoned his vagabond ways some time ago, and usually had on a seaman's uniform or a black velvet coat, the kind worn by artists. But he still had the habit of doing shocking things and was unlikely to give it up.

Reality surpassed all expectations: the Captain was decked out. He had on a black suit which was much too big for him: the jacket hung on him like a sack, with the sleeves covering his fingers so that he looked

as if he had no hands. The Captain had apparently heard that one's tie should match one's suit, and so had put on a lackluster black silk tie, which gave the finishing touch to the portrait of a torchbearer at a funeral procession in the times of Dickens. Had he got all dressed up in order to shock Jones? Like all softhearted people, Mary was not particularly penetrating. She glanced at her husband, hoping that by his reaction she could judge whether the Captain was in earnest or whether the masquerade was one of his jokes. Jones gave a little start of surprise, but obviously he did not suspect any hoax. And her heart ached with tenderness—not for the elegantly dressed and self-possessed Jones, but for the awkward figure in funereal attire.

Jones immediately realized that his rival had won a quick game, everything was in his favor, even his worst blunders, and it only confirmed once again that the whole trouble lay with Mary, not the Captain, and it was useless to fight him. Jones could hardly wait till supper was over, and then he performed a little act: he looked at his watch, moaned, and gave a look of disappointment as he apologized to his wife and the Captain, saying that he had to meet a friend at the club and it was time he left. That was clearly a breach of etiquette, for he should at least have waited till they had coffee and liqueur. But Mary thought that for the first time Jones's self-control abandoned him. The Captain under-

stood nothing, of course, he civilly excused Jones and shook hands with him.

"Not a bad sort, your..." he said good-naturedly after Jones had left. "I thought he was worse. I rather like that—it shows he knows his place."

Mary made no answer, she now pitied Jones. He had dragged himself to the club while his heart was filled with utter misery, and there he had to pretend that nothing was the matter and he was in excellent spirits, he would have to smile and make jokes when he was on the verge of howling. Poor Jones!

But Mary did not know her husband very well, after all. Jones's profession required that he should always foresee all contingencies, for the success of an expedition depended on many different circumstances. One could not, of course, foresee everything, but one must try.

He could not have supposed that the Captain would come dressed like a clown and that Mary would lose all control of herself out of pity for him. Jones could not bear to see so much tenderness flowing to another, and so he got away. But he foresaw the main move he would make: he would go off if only so that the two of them could be left alone. He knew he wouldn't be in a mood for going to his club.

Here a word should be said about an institution which is mistakenly thought to have been born in our enlightened times, but which

had already existed, if not on such a large scale, in the middle of the thirties. What is considered new is quite old, only forgotten. Today every self-respecting hotel on the French Riviera has a staff of young women on call, but in good old prewar England there were discrete little hotels which derived a nice income not by catering to commercial travellers and old ladies on a trip. Jones, who was meticulous in everything, had access to one of such hotels. He was astounded when he realized that a night with a call girl cost much more than what a native worker on an expedition earned for a whole season. "What can this young person do?" he asked himself, looking at the photograph of a dark-haired girl with light, wide-set eyes. She differed from the beautiful women whose photographs appeared in magazines by a stamp of individuality: her shapely mouth was unsmiling, her light, somewhat elongated eyes had a quiet, stern look in them—it was the serious, no-nonsense look of a strict professional. Jones was a professional himself in his field, and without hesitation he chose this girl, though the album he had been looking at had pictures of women who smiled and were more beautiful.

When she came at exactly the appointed hour, like the office girl who did not arrive at work a minute earlier than she was supposed to, Jones was stunned: she was like no one he had ever seen. Taller than he, with broad

shoulders and strong, rounded calves, her head proudly set on her neck, she was a warmaiden, a Brunhild, a Valkyrie. She had on a lead a tall Afghan hound with large soft paws, luxuriant and thoroughly washed and combed golden hair and a long sharp muzzle.

"What a beauty!" exclaimed Jones as he helped Brunhild take off her chinchilla tippet.

She seated herself in an armchair and crossed her legs, her dog sat down beside her.

"Do you always have him with you?" Jones was interested.

"It gives you style," the girl said, unsmilingly. "When a client sees such a wonder, he no longer thinks he is overpaying. Besides, he protects me. You have no idea what crazy men I've had to deal with." She looked over Jones carefully. "You are not crazy, but you are a difficult case."

"In what sense?"

"You are not going to cry?" she asked, ignoring his question.

Jones pretended to laugh.

"Elderly married men usually cry when they fall, like nuns who have been raped."

"What are you talking about?"

"To be unfaithful for the first time at your age is more terrible than losing your virginity. But you needn't worry, there is nothing to be afraid of."

Jones was angered, but it seemed foolish to quarrel with a woman who cost so much. He shrugged his shoulders.

"What do you know about me?"

"You are a married man," she said, looking at the wedding-ring on Jones's finger. "You are a Londoner and a gentleman. You have never had anything to do with love that is for sale. A rich man who has kept his looks and who knows his worth—it shouldn't be difficult for you to have a mistress who is a woman from your own circle. It would be more respectable and also much cheaper."

"I fully agree with you on that last point," Jones remarked.

"We are for the nouveaux riches, American millionaires who think Europe is a sexual paradise, impotent but rich old men and youths who want to know everything quickly," she went on, taking no notice of Jones's interjection. "You belong to none of these categories. So it can be only one thing: a disaster. You are wrecked, old chap." The familiar address sounded oddly moving.

"You are very penetrating," Jones said.

He suddenly noticed that since Brunhild came in his wound had stopped bleeding. Of course it was not healed, but even a little respite was welcome.

"What are you thinking of, old chap?"

"Of you."

"How very touching. So you only needed someone to talk to?"

"No," said Jones. "Can the dog go into the hall?"

"He will not be in the way. Or are you allergic?"

"No. But I believe that animals have the rudiments of intelligence."

"Roy!" Brunhild said in a commanding voice.

The dog got up, with a sad look in his chestnut-brown eyes. Slowly and with his head hanging down he went to the hall.

Later, at supper, which was served in the room, Brunhild said:

"You were splendid. So what is your trouble? Shall I make a guess? Your wife is unfaithful."

"Let us assume it is so," said Jones. He wondered why he allowed himself to discuss the matter with the girl.

"Can't you leave her?"

Jones shook his head.

"Children, a home, a settled life..." Her attention seemed to wander, then suddenly she pulled herself together. "All that is unimportant. Love, true, beautiful love. It is rare, but it happens sometimes. Why doesn't she leave you?"

Jones kept silent. He was ashamed to continue the conversation, and yet he wanted her to talk.

"Again it's children, a home, position in society... Let me ask you: is it because the lover doesn't want her to leave?"

"Maybe he wants it, but he doesn't say."

"Is he poor?"

"He is unsettled, rootless."

"Understandable. It's more convenient for him this way. How long has this been going on?"

"All our lives, so it seems to me now."

"Is she a slut?"

"She is a kind and sweet woman."

"But a little dull, neither fish nor fowl."

"Nonsense. She is very feminine, sweet..."

"And insipid," the girl added with confidence. "Show me the husband, and I will tell you what his wife is like. Set your mind at ease, she will not leave you."

"Are you a fortune-teller?"

"No, but it is all very simple. Your Mary has nowhere else to go."

"How do you know her name?"

"You twice called me 'Mary'. There is an end to everything, and she will soon see that herself. You only need to be patient. Meanwhile, if things get unbearable, you have my telephone number. Now you understand why I am so expensive?"

"I do indeed," said Jones in all seriousness.

The evening passed uneventfully for Mary and the Captain. The Captain expressed a wish to see the house and made the tour with great thoroughness, refraining from uttering any critical remarks. He was impressed by Jones's study, in particular, his library. And he praised the paintings of which there were not many, but all were of the highest quality; he paused before his own landscape with the

overturned boat and became rather thoughtful.

"That was the work of a young man. It won't hurt Jones to have one of my later works."

Mary thought he was joking. But the Captain was entirely serious, sincere, and candid. It was not often that the obstreperous Captain was all these things at once.

Whenever Mary felt that the Captain was moving away from her or when she liked him less than usual, she resorted to tenderness and love. She did so now, but she was rebuffed, not rudely, but unmistakably. Perhaps he was restrained by the fact that Jones might soon return, or he was overwhelmed by the whole way of life he had just witnessed, so durable and affluent, so different from his own. He said, when Mary gently insisted, with an important air: "I may be a pirate, but I am not a pickpocket." "A small-time pirate!" Mary thought angrily to herself. Later it occurred to her that the Captain had a respect for Hearth and Home, which probably showed his peasant roots; unlike her, he had not been thoroughly urbanized.

The Captain behaved properly, even pompously, on this visit. He insisted on waiting till Jones returned and reminded Mary of the watchman who must get the owner of the goods placed in his care to sign a receipt before he could leave.

He waited, but Jones did not turn up, and finally, grumbling a little about the "old man

going out on a spree", he left.

The same thing happened on all subsequent visits of the Captain (to Mary these visits were God's punishment, but Jones insisted on them, and the Captain did not say no): at a certain moment Jones would remember that he had an important appointment and leave the two of them together. He did not always see the girl with the Afghan hound; more often he went to his club or to a night bar. He foresaw that Mary's faithfulness on these occasions was guaranteed by the Captain. But he was not particularly concerned about it. Since he met Brunhild, his love for Mary took on a more spiritual aspect, though he was just as anxious as before to preserve conjugal happiness. Deep in her heart Mary divined that Jones had found someone, and, without being fully conscious of it, was jealous.

There were noticeable changes in the Captain's life too. Earlier, his fame as a Don Juan had helped him in his career as an artist. Society got interested in him and it was even fashionable to own a few paintings done by the "pirate", the rough seaman who was the lover of a baronet's wife. Society conspired, as it were, to support this devilishly talented and romantic rebel.

Being close to Mary over the years, however, the Captain had become more civilized. Drunken debauches, fights and bad language were all a thing of the past. Then there were changes in the administration that had the

final say on the Captain's career as a seafarer. His new employers found him an able, experienced and reliable seaman who had been undeservedly kept back. The Captain was promoted. He was not put in charge of an ocean liner, a whaling fleet or a large oil tanker, but he no longer had to knock about the coast in an old ship. The ocean was now open to him in all its grandeur. And at last the day came when he was to go to sea not as first mate, but as the captain of a research ship, and not just to any place, but to Georges Bank, which for a salt was what Mecca was for a Muslim. It gave you a good feeling just to say the manly words "Georges Bank".

Poor Mary had never heard of it.

"Never heard of Georges Bank? How can anyone be so stupid?" The Captain was not even angry, he was dismayed. So that was the woman on whom he had wasted his affections. "How utterly stupid!"

"Very well, I am stupid," said Mary humbly. "But tell me what it is."

"Don't know what Georges Bank is, and you want to be the friend of a sailor?"

"I want to be the wife of a sailor," said Mary in a low voice. "I have been a friend long enough."

"A single man goes farther," said the Captain sententiously, after some thought.

Mary burst into tears. How many years had she waited for the Captain to ask her to stay with him forever, how many years had she

dreamed of being wholly united to him. She was thoroughly sickened of being an unfaithful wife, a wicked mother, a woman who violated social conventions, and she was getting on in years, did she not deserve to live in peace and quiet? Her love, patience, loyalty were nothing compared to some Georges Bank. Georges Bank be damned! And why did men in a difficult moment hide themselves behind maxims, high-sounding phrases?

Of course they made up. She with her kind heart could not stand up against his angry murmurs of apology and vague promises of "giving the matter serious thought". She then asked him to draw for her a picture of Georges Bank, which again made the Captain furious: how could anyone draw an empty spot? Mary was even more puzzled: if it was just an empty spot, why make such a fuss about it? But she kept silent, apart from urging the Captain to dress warmly as there would be strong winds where he was going.

The Captain left. Jones returned from his expedition: copper-red, spare, with not an ounce of fat on him, and looking younger. He was presented the Gold Medal of the Swedish Royal Society in a ceremony held in the Swedish Embassy.

"I am companion to two great men in England," Mary said to herself with bitter irony. "I probably bring luck to them, only not to myself."

And it was indeed so: both Jones and the

Captain thrived, but she had fallen between two stools, and autumn was knocking at her door. She became a grandmother—an event that brought her joy tinged with sadness. "Granny Mary", as she was now called at home, was expected to care for a bright-eyed, noisy cherub who demanded constant attention. She spent whole days at her son's home, and when Jones came to fetch her in the evening she met him with a shy, happy smile.

Wrapped up in her new duties she completely forgot when the Captain was to return. Of this she was reminded by a letter from him: for the first time he asked her to meet him at the Southend port. He probably wanted her to see him in all his splendor, since he would be returning from the mysterious Georges Bank and also he would be at the helm as the ship came into harbor. But the letter reached Mary too late for her to meet him.

Soon she received another message from the Captain: it was an angry, resentful letter which had an unexpected ending. The Captain had seriously thought matters over and come to the conclusion that their liaison cast a shadow on him, considering his present situation in life. They had spared Jones's feelings long enough, now they must legitimize their relationship. Despite a certain stiffness of tone and bureaucratic terms of expression (no wonder the Captain disliked the epistolary form of communication), these were the very

words Mary had waited to hear for a good part of her life. But instead of filling her with joy they threw her into confusion and made her anxious. They had come too late, and yet she had no choice, it was her duty to be with the Captain. She recalled the face of her little grandson, how he would screw up his eyes, and burst into sobs.

Returning from a walk Jones found her lying in bed with her face buried in the pillow. Her back shook slightly. It was the back of a woman who was no longer young, with its somewhat pointed shoulder-blades.

Turning her head so that he would not see her tear-stained face, she handed him the letter.

"I won't give you up," said Jones quietly after reading the letter.

"What should I do?"

"I don't know. You have a grandson to look after."

"What if he comes for me?"

"I won't give you up," Jones repeated. "But he won't come."

The Captain did not come, nor did he answer Mary's letter.

Some time passed when Mary heard from one of her friends that the Captain had had a heart attack and had barely pulled through.

Almost in a daze she made ready to go to the Captain. Jones did not try to stop her. They had lived together all their lives, but now she could not think of a single word to

say to him. And perhaps he did not need it. He looked composed and thoughtful. When she was already seated in the car he said in a soft voice as if to reassure her:

"I won't give you up."

The outer door of the Captain's flat was unlocked. Mary got frightened: in the home of the deceased the doors were always left open. She walked in, passed the entrance hall, and throwing back a bamboo curtain that creaked, entered the studio.

The Captain was sitting at the table on which stood several bottles, with the meerschaum pipe at the corner of his mouth; opposite him in an armchair was the well-known London model Lizzy, who sat comfortably with her bare legs tucked under her. She was laughing, spilling wine from a glass which she raised high above her head. The happy pair barely had any clothes on. She was wearing the tops of Mary's blue silk pyjamas, while the Captain had on the bottoms. In the first moments Mary was outraged not by the Captain's infidelity, but by the way they made use of her pyjamas.

She rushed at Lizzy with clenched fists.

"You dirty bitch! How dare you!"

For some reason the strapping girl got terrified. She dropped the glass and ran out of the studio. Mary went after her, seized her by the sleeve, ripping it. Lizzy slipped out of the pyjama tops, picked up her dress that was thrown over the back of

a chair and bolted through the door.

"Lizzy!" roared the Captain. "Where are you going?"

He got up from the table, a little shaky, went past Mary—she was assailed by a smell of wine, tobacco, unwashed body and perfume—and looked outside.

It flashed upon her that this was not the first time the two had been together. And what did she know about him? What had he been doing without her?

"What a wicked man you are!" she cried, pressing her hands to her temples. "What a wicked man you are!"

"You are no angel yourself!" said the Captain angrily. "I nearly died, and where were you? That girl took care of me, she's been a real friend."

Mary knew he was lying; the girl did not take care of him, she was merely someone nice to have around before he started drinking. Oh, if it weren't for her blue pyjamas! How often had she fallen asleep beside him wearing those very pyjama tops which she saw wrapped around the plump body of the girl! Why did he humiliate her so? Of course he had been drinking and could not answer for his actions. At that thought Mary suddenly recollected that alcohol would be fatal for the Captain who had just had a heart attack.

"You mustn't drink. Not even a drop," she said.

"That's none of your damned business,"

the Captain said between his teeth.

He was deeply offended by her words; it was as though she had encroached on something which he regarded as sacrosanct, and all her other grave offences were nothing compared to that.

"Just you try and tell me what to do, you bitch!"

"I certainly will tell you, you mustn't drink."

Through force of habit she had brought along juices in cans and packets of vitamins and medicines which she began to take out of her bag.

"So you think you can pay me off?" said the Captain with a look of hatred. "What am I, a beggar who had never seen this rubbish?" He came closer to her, and again she was hit by the nauseating smell of that girl, and it befogged her mind. If she were more herself she would have realized that there was more love in the Captain's look of hatred than in any hysterical outburst of passion or polite show of fondness.

The Captain put out his hand and swept everything onto the floor. Even the meekest soul would rise in revolt, if extremely provoked. Clumsily Mary struck the Captain on the face. He turned his head, and her sharp finger-nail caught his cheek, a drop of blood appeared on his face. The Captain touched his hand to the spot and saw blood on his finger.

"You spilled my blood," he said in a tragic

voice. "You dared?.."

He dealt Mary two deafening blows, on the eye and cheekbone. Mary fell to the floor. Slowly she picked herself up, holding onto a chair. There was a loud buzzing in her head, she could not see with her left eye, the whole left side of her face was numb. "He had blinded my eye," Mary thought, without panic.

Her mind seemed a complete blank, but a voice inside her told her what she must do: to creep back to her corner, there was nothing else she could do.

In the train she noticed that everyone was looking at her swollen face, but she paid no attention. The eye that had been hit could still see; they said you couldn't blind the eye with the fist, as the eye was protected by the eye-socket.

Jones did not ask her any questions when she came home.

"Let's attend to it," he said and led her to the bathroom.

The Captain's drinking bout lasted some time. After that he again fell ill and was hospitalized. He made a surprisingly quick recovery and was soon discharged. On his way home he bought a bottle of Scotch and picked up at the port a girl called Maggie, who was a model for a man named Lynch, a clever forger of old icons. But when he got home he did not feel like drinking, and Maggie's company only irked him and so he turned her out. He had

no desire to paint either. Thoughts about future voyages did not cheer him up, even recollections about Georges Bank filled him with disgust. To have to spend six months at sea while those scientists poked about, doing heaven knows what, seemed idiotic. Damn it all!

At last he had to admit to himself that he missed Mary. After all he got used to her. She was not a bad sort and didn't give herself airs. He had gone a bit too far; he had overvalued his independence. She was a tame little woman with few complaints, but at last she could bear it no longer. He should have been gentler with her. But, on the other hand, he must not forget that she hit him in the face, and all because she saw that girl in her pyjama tops. Rich people were proprietors. He despised clothes, it was the man himself that counted for him. But never mind, she would crawl back to him. What else could she do?

Mary did not crawl back to him. The Captain was at first uneasy, and then got terribly depressed. Never before had he gone all to pieces like this, and, just think, because of a woman! He felt disgusted with himself. His successes in the last few years meant nothing to him. There was no justice in this world, and there never would be. He was supposed to be glad that he sailed to Georges Bank in an old tub, while all sorts of good-for-nothings steered oceangoing ships, shattering the

waters of the Arctic, skirting the Tierra del Fuego. He had sold about twenty of his paintings for a song, while tricksters like Rouault who made smudges on canvasses raked in money and Lynch bought a castle. He wanted to unburden his heart, but there was no one he could talk to. That silly girl Lizzy started undressing when all you wanted was to talk about the weather; she was nothing but a pink animal. He needed someone who would understand him. Mary was staying away on purpose, to show that her pride was hurt. Well, she had stayed away long enough. No use overdoing it.

In spite of what happened, the Captain had complete confidence in his power over Mary's heart: she was at his beck and call. True, he slapped her, but she drove him to it. He was laid up in hospital, sick as a dog, but she didn't care; she busied herself with her grandson's diapers. A child, a miracle! She was getting over-sentimental. She ought to have more pity for grownups who suffered... She made a vulgar scene, attacking Lizzy, his model, the only person who was loyal to him. She all but beat the girl up and made her run out of the flat naked. And what did she expect him to do? Just because she was gadding about, was he to kill his desire? He was drunk, but whose fault was it?.. But all that was unimportant now. He needed her, he had gotten used to her, did she not realize that they couldn't be without each other?

That was all Jones's doing. It was time he was taught a lesson; enough of this playing the solicitous lover. Once in one's lifetime it was all right to hit someone below the belt.

He wrote a rude letter to Jones: "Do you call yourself a man? How many years have I been living with your wife, and you don't give a rap. I've had enough of this. Let the woman go immediately."

He did not have to wait long for an answer: "My dear Captain, you are quite mistaken. I have been living with your mistress for many years, and it has suited me very well. We are both happy men. Sincerely, Jones."

REQUEST TO READERS

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Yuri Nagibin (b. 1920) published his first short story in 1940, while he was still a student in the Institute of Cinematography in Moscow. In June 1941 Nagibin volunteered for active duty, and was posted to the front lines as the war correspondent of the *Trud* (Labour) newspaper.

The range of Nagibin's themes is exceptionally broad: he has written about the war, dramatic aspects of contemporary life, about childhood and children, about hunting and nature, and much else.

More than 50 collections of Nagibin's stories have been published to date, with an aggregate of over 20 million copies sold. Collections of his works have been published in Chile, France, Great Britain, Holland, Italy, Japan, and the USA.

Nagibin has also written a number of film scripts. Among them *The Little Girl and the Echo* (which won the Grand Prix in Cannes and a silver sails award in Locarno). The Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa also used Nagibin's script for his film *Dersu Uzala*, which won an Oscar.

This volume contains Nagibin's better-known stories.

2 p. 20 к.